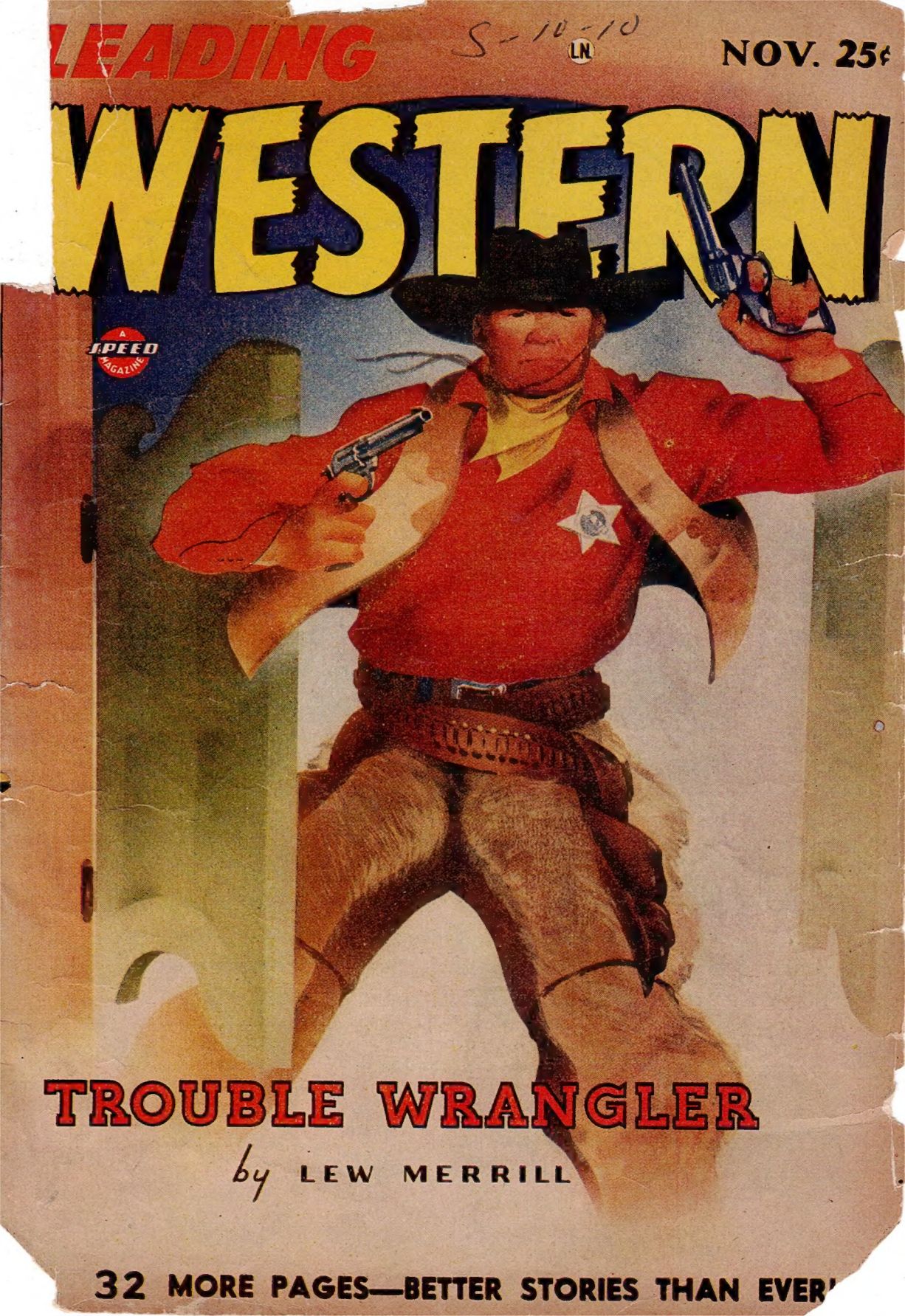
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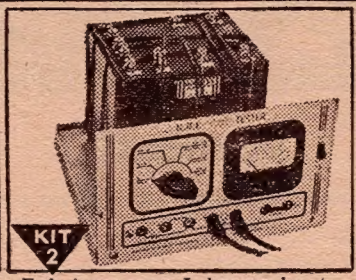

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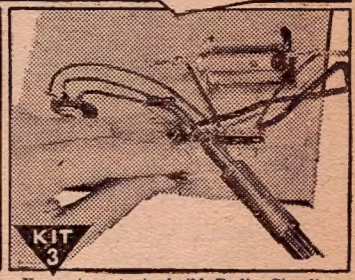

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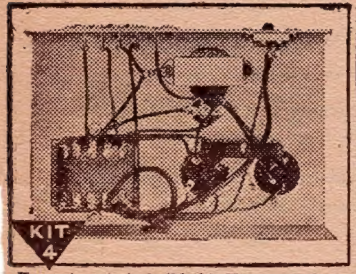

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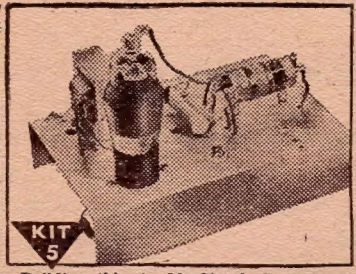

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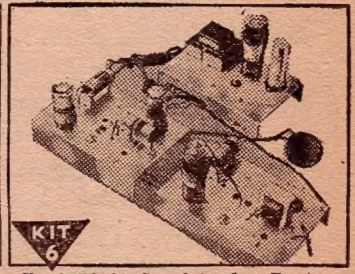

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November 1947

Vol. 3, No. 5

LEADING WESTERN

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Trouble Wrangler

BIG TEX and Little Tex rode right point, Luke Jones and Missouri Ike the left. Cherokee, and Owens, driving the chuck wagon, brought up the drag. In the lead, Phil Darrell rode with his foreman, Eli Rouse. It was about five in the evening.

Topping a hogback, Phil and Rouse reined in. Ahead, no more than three or four miles, the dazzle of the western sun was reflected from the corrugated roofs of Baxter Springs, in shimmering waves.

"Well, we made it on time," said Phil, "but I'm sort of worried about Dan Hart. Seems he could have sent back word of some kind during the two weeks he's been on the trail."

"We sure ought to hear somethin' from him in Baxter Springs," said Rouse.

Suddenly the rush came—men yelling and reeling as they raced, and at their head was the town marshal, Jere Scope.

By LEW MERRILL

"Anyways, the worst part of the trail's past. We cleared the Comanche country and the Strip, and from now on it's a clear road along the Sedalia Trail to Quincy."

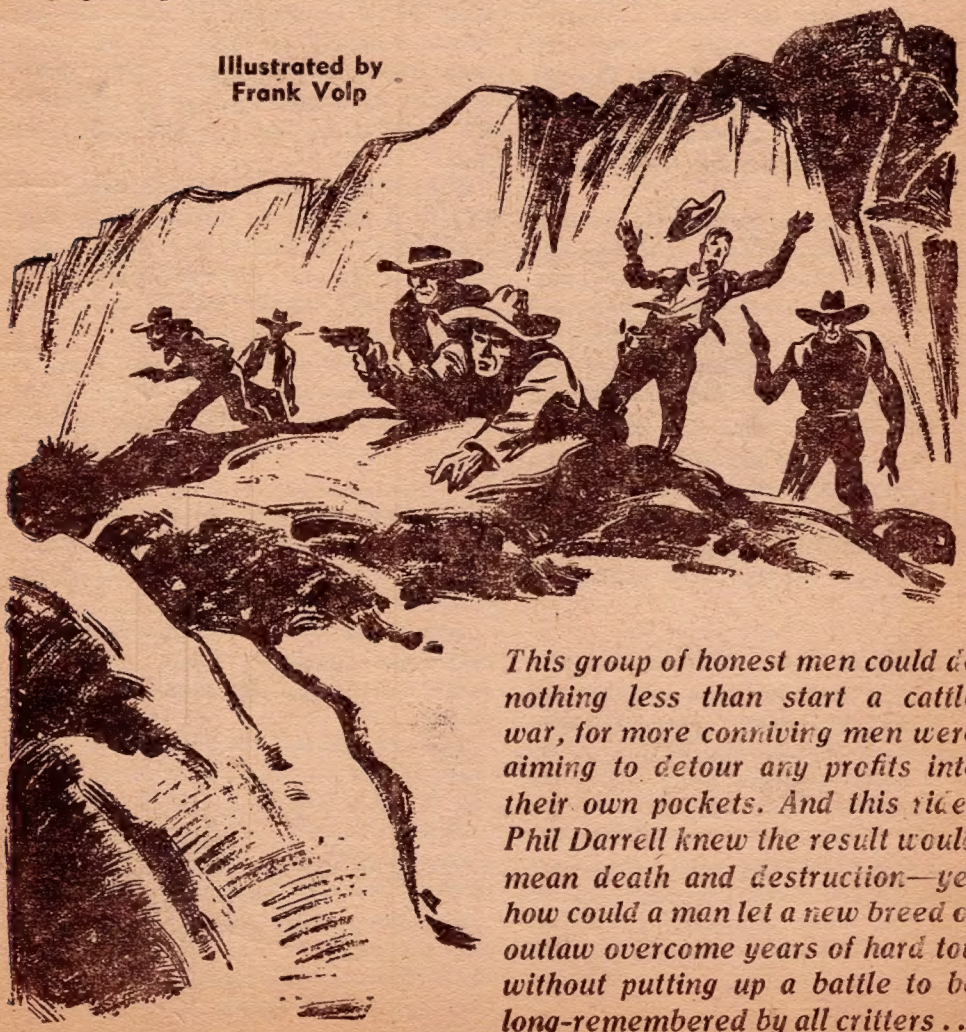
Phil nodded without speaking. He turned in his hull to look at the herd coming up behind him. His partner, grizzled old Dan Hart, had left two weeks before him to drive half their herd of longhorns north to the new cattle-market at Quincy, which was now linked up with the Eastern markets by rail. Phil, with his foreman and six waddies, had followed with the other twenty-five hundred cattle.

The pushing of the railroad westward had suddenly provided a market for the almost valueless Texas longhorns. Fortunes were being made along the trails—Sedalia, Chisholm, Oliver Loving. Huge herds of steers were being driven northward that fall. Steers that were worth eight dollars a head in Texas would bring four or five times that amount in Quincy, or any of the railroad towns. This allowed plenty of latitude for strays; likewise for steers run off by Indians on the way.

Phil had been singularly lucky. He had brought his herd through the Indian country practically intact.

The steers were coming on behind. Phil and Rouse resumed their ride. In

Illustrated by Frank Volp



This group of honest men could do nothing less than start a cattle war, for more conniving men were aiming to detour any profits into their own pockets. And this rider Phil Darrell knew the result would mean death and destruction—yet how could a man let a new breed of outlaw overcome years of hard toil without putting up a battle to be long-remembered by all critters . .?

the valley on the other side of the hogback, Baxter Springs disappeared from view. It would become visible again from the next low ridge in front. But, as the two men began to address their horses to it, a group of some half-dozen punchers appeared, reined in upon the summit, their right hands upraised in gestures that clearly meant "No trespassing!"

At the same time Eli Rouse uttered an oath and swept his arm in a half-circle. Two more groups of riders were closing in on the flanks of the herd.

"Jayhawkers!" he ejaculated. "Looks like a hold-up, Phil!"

It wasn't any news to Phil that so-called Jayhawkers—the name a survival from the days of the border warfare—actually organized bandits, levied toll upon cattle herds that passed through territory they controlled. However, in a large measure an understanding had been reached between the cattlemen and these gentry.

The profits made on a drive were so considerable that in general it was considered more profitable to pay a moderate toll—say twenty-five cents a head—than to fight and risk the loss of half the herd through a stampede. Phil and Dan Hart, his partner, also Phil and Eli, had discussed the possibility of a holdup.

Much as the two partners disliked being held up, they had agreed that it was one of the possibilities of the drive and that they would have to pay. Twenty-five cents had been the limit they had agreed on.

THE herd was coming on fast and, seeing that the trail was blocked, the leaders had slowed down and were beginning to mill around. Two riders detached themselves from the group on the ridge and rode down to meet Phil and Eli. One of them was a hard-faced hombre of about forty-five, with a long black moustache, and a large tin badge upon his chest. The other, obviously a foreman, looked even tougher. Red-haired and wiry, he was dangling a six-gun in his hand.

"Evenin', gents," said Tin Badge. "I'm Jere Scope, town marshal of Baxter Springs. Jest whar did yuh think yuh was drivin' thisyere herd?"

"Passing through Baxter Springs on the way north," said Phil. "I'm Darrell. This is my foreman, Rouse. You got any objections?"

Jere Scope let out a guffaw. "I'll say so," he answered. "I'm representin' the opinion of every livin' soul in Baxter Springs and I'm tellin' yuh we don't permit longhorns from the South to pass through this section of Kansas. From Texas, ain't yuh?"

"We are. What's that got to do with it?"

"Plenty. All Texas steers is sufferin' from Texas fever, and we don't aim to spread it among our stock. You kin turn back, Mister, because if yore within sight or smell of Baxter Springs by mornin', it's goin' to be bad fer you and yore herd."

Behind Phil, the steers had begun to mill in a vast circle, pressed in by the two groups of hostile punchers. Luke Jones and Missouri came galloping up to Phil. "What's cookin' here?" demanded Missouri.

The moment was tense. Jere Scope's men had come up and were engaging in provocative remarks. Phil drew out his tobacco-bag and rolled himself a quirly.

"I had a partner, name of Dan Hart," he observed. "He took the Sedalia Trail, must have passed through here two weeks ago with twenty-five hundred steers. You seen him?"

Jere Scope and the foreman with him exchanged glances. "Never heard of him," said Scope. He didn't pass this way."

Phil continued: "I'm ready to pay transit dues or tolls, or whatever you call it, up to twenty-five cents a head."

Jere Scope said: "Thisyere gent is Sim Boyce, Lew Colvin's foreman. He'll talk to you. I'm only representin' the law."

Sim Boyce said, "Mister, you couldn't buy the right of way through Baxter Springs or into Kansas fer any money you offered. My orders is to stop you. Mebbe you could go around through

Missouri. They ain't so pertic'lar there."

"Suppose we pass straight through Baxter Springs, we'll be in Missouri in an hour or two," said Phil. "We don't aim to stop here."

"Yuh'll turn back!" snarled the other. "Yore contaminatin' the grass already and Scope told you we don't aim to have no Texas fever in our herds."

"Yuh had yore warning," added the marshal. "If thar's sight or smell of yore cattle come mornin', they'll be impounded and you'll all be held fer trial."

Eli Rouse shouted, "We'll be damned if we do! There ain't no Texas fever in our herds. We got the right to pass through Baxter Springs or any other town we damn please, and we aim to do it!"

FROM right point, Big and Little Tex had come riding up, the former a two hundred and fifty pounder sitting his saddle like a sack of oats; Little Tex short, dark and wiry, hunched forward over his horn. The six men sat their horses, confronting at least three times as many hostile punchers. Guns were already half-way out of holsters. Taunts and curses had begun to be exchanged.

For all the rage that burned within him, Phil was sensible enough to size up the situation. He knew Lew Colvin by reputation. He had built up a large herd of longhorns, mostly from "mixed" stock of bulls and cows cut out from southern herds by Indians and purchased from them. It was current in Texas that trouble was due to break out with Colvin and other northern stockmen on account of the eruption of the Texas trail-herds into the lucrative northern market.

"That'll be enough," Phil told his men. "Scope, we'll camp here and we'll be on the move at daybreak, either through Baxter Springs or around into Missouri. But no man bluffs me off the trail. I'll see whoever's in authority in Baxter Springs."

"Sure, sure," said the town marshal with a surprising change of tone. "Us fellers ain't lookin' fer trouble, only aimin' to purtect our stock. You ride in tonight and talk to Tom Garrett. He's the mayor. He'll wise you up to the laws of Kansas."

Phil said: "I'll see Mr. Colvin too."

Sim Boyce grinned. "He's a kinder hard man to see, Mister," he said. "Course, yuh kin try. It ain't my business who yuh see, so long as yore gone by mornin'." He turned to his punchers. "Come along, fellers, I guess this hombre's seen the light!" he called.

"What did yore name happen to be?" Scope inquired of Phil.

"Phil Darrell of the H-Brand Ranch, Harrison County."

"Pleased to have met up with yuh, Darrell, and I'm plumb glad we've reached an understandin'. We're law-abidin' folks in Kansas and we sure don't want no trouble, so long as our rights ain't trompled on. Come, fellers!"

Phil and his five companions sat their horses and watched Scope and his men ride away. Phil said: "Round up the steers and bed them down for the night, Eli. By daybreak we'll have the situation sized up."

CHAPTER II

The Mayor and Molly

IT WAS DARK before the steers had been quieted down. For the first watch, Big and Little Tex, Missouri and Luke Jones rode guard, circling them and singing. Phil Darrell, Eli Rouse and Cherokee sat about the fire beside Owens's chuck wagon.

Phil said: "Of course I understand how you all feel. I don't like bein' held up any more than you do. But Dan Hart and I talked it all over before we started and we agreed we wasn't goin' to start a cattle war and fight our way clear up from Texas to Quincy."

"But that hombre refused to take toll to let us go through," said Rouse. "What game do yuh think he's playin', Phil?"

"Way it looks to me, he figured it would be cheaper to keep us out of the northern market than to take toll."

"It ain't more'n a few miles into Missouri!" protested the foreman. "We could

cut across country and strike the Trail again in a day or two."

"It's pretty rough country," said Phil. "And this has been a dry season. Still, we could get through and that's what I don't understand. Maybe I'll get wiser when I've seen this Tom Garrett, the mayor. I'm aimin' to have a talk with Colvin, too, if he's in town. Thing that worries me most is what's become of Dan Hart."

"Maybe he smelled trouble and made a detour into Missouri, at Fort Gibson," Rouse suggested.

"I'm not lookin' for trouble," said Phil. "I'll keep out of a fight as long as I can see a good chance of gettin' our steers through to Quincy. You tell the boys I don't want any gunplay if it can be helped. What do you think, Owens?" He addressed the lean old cook, who had joined the group.

"I figger we'd best start for Missouri right now," said Owens.

Cherokee, the half-breed said: "I think Dan Hart passed this way. There was sign along the trail."

"Yeah, but—" Phil began.

"Two-weeks-old sign. There wasn't no other herd but Dan's was takin' the Sedalia. Mebbe this was Dan's herd and mebbe not, but they turn east eight or ten miles back."

Phil got up. "Well, I'm ridin' into Baxter Springs," he said. "There must be somebody in that town knows what happened to Dan's herd. And it's not likely Lew Colvin don't know. I'll bet he keeps track of every herd that crosses the Cherokee Strip."

"I'm ridin' with you, Phil," said Eli Rouse.

"No, I'm ridin' alone. You stay here and keep your eyes peeled for mischief."

Phil got his horse, saddled and bitted it and started off, just as the full moon loomed up out of the eastern horizon. It was the fear of what might have happened to Dan that concerned him most. He had worked up to a full partnership with the grizzled old ranchman; Dan had been like a father to Phil. They had built up a fine ranch in Harrison County and Dan, always progressive, had been talking of introducing some of the new breeds, Shorthorn, Angus and Hereford, which were beginning to supplant the longhorn in some sections of the country.

Phil couldn't believe that Colvin's foreman and Jere Scope, the marshal, knew nothing of Dan's whereabouts. On the other hand, if Dan had decided to cross into Missouri at Fort Gibson, he would have contrived to send him word.

TOPPING the ridge, Phil saw the scattered lights of Baxter Springs ahead of him, irregular dots that concentrated in a long and lurid burst along what must be Main Street. He rode at a slow lope, scanning the country on each side of him for ambush, from force of habit. But nothing happened and a little later he was threading the main street of the town.

Baxter Springs was very much alive. The main street appeared to consist entirely of saloons and gambling-houses. The click of the roulette ball was almost continuous, bursts of sound came from rat-tag bands, men were passing continuously in and out of the batwing doors of saloons, and horses were tethered thickly at the hitch-racks on either side of the street.

A little beyond the heart of the town, Phil saw a building with TOWN MARSHAL over the door, visible in the light of a large, swinging oil lamp. There was what looked like a jail adjoining, forming the lower story of what might have been the town offices. Phil dismounted and fastened his horse to the tie-rail. Advancing, he found that his surmise was correct. He could read the words, MAYOR'S OFFICE, on a shingle suspended from the upper story. In the room behind it a lamp was burning.

Phil went up a flight of rickety stairs and pushed open the door. A girl was sitting at a table, going through some papers, a pretty girl of about twenty, with red-brown hair and eyes that looked very blue in the light of the lamp. At Phil's entrance she uttered a little cry and

made an instinctive gesture of concealing the papers with her hand.

"I'm sorry if I'm intrudin', Miss," said Phil. "I guess it's after office hours but I was lookin' for Mr. Garrett, the mayor."

By the girl's quick glance at the rear door of the room, Phil knew that Tom Garrett was on the premises. She looked back at him doubtfully and then a little smile creased her mouth.

"It is after hours and you won't be able to see Mr. Garrett tonight," she said. "I'm Molly Garrett, his niece. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Phil explained as succinctly as possible. "I want to keep inside the law and I'm not hunting trouble," he said. "What I want to find out is whether there's a law to stop southern herds from passing through Baxter Springs. And I've reason to believe that my partner, Dan Hart, passed through here with his herd two weeks ago."

Molly wrinkled her forehead. "The town has the power to pass ordinances for the prevention of disease, of course," she said. "And the councilmen passed one some time ago, forbidding the passage of Texas cattle through the district, on account of Texas fever."

"Who are the councilmen?" asked Phil.

"Well, there's Mr. Colvin. And the town marshal, Mr. Scope. And—well, my uncle."

Phil said bluntly: "I want to know whether my partner, Mr. Hart, passed through this town."

She was frightened now—there was no doubt of it. But a diversion came in the shape of a man who came bursting through the rear door. A man of sixty, with white hair falling about his face, a heavy white moustache, a soiled and baggy suit.

"What's this, Molly?" he mumbled, staggering forward. He was in that state of drunkenness that immediately precedes coma; he caught the back of a chair and stood swaying and muttering.

"Go back to bed, Uncle," said the girl. "It's all right."

"What's he want? Who is he? Looks like another of them damned southern ranchers. He can't pass through here. No, sirree. No more than the last one could."

"Meaning my partner, Dan Hart?" asked Phil. The tone was suave but he was inwardly tremulous; he felt on the verge of a discovery. "Which way did he go?"

As he moved along the line, he heard a roar.

THE old man mouthed inaudibly, then let his voice out in a screech.

"It ain't my business what Lew Colvin does! I'm jest the mayor. I don't know nothing about his business and I don't interfere!"

"Go back to bed, Uncle," said the girl again.

"I've heard of folks knowin' about oth-

er folks' business, even if they didn't interfere," said Phil. He stepped up to the mayor. "Garrett, you know what happened to my partner," he said. "And you're goin' to tell me."

"I tell you I don't know nothin', except there was a ruckus between his waddies and Lew Colvin's. I don't even know what his name was. All I know is arter threatenin' Lew, he agreed to go around through the badlands and it all ended peaceable."

"This was two weeks ago?"

"Yeah, more or less."

"What did this hombre look like? Was he old or young?"

"I tell you I never saw him. It warn't my business. I've told yuh all I know."

"That's all he knows, Mister," said the girl. "Go back to bed, Uncle."

Old Garret burst into maudlin tears. "If ever thar was a black-hearted coyote in this world, his name's Lew Colvin! If I was to tell what I know—"

But Molly's arm was about her uncle's shoulders and she was propelling him out through the rear door. Phil could hear her voice raised in protest, but couldn't make out what she was saying. He lingered for two or three minutes and she came back.

"How about that ruckus between Dan Hart and Colvin's waddies?" he asked excitedly.

"Listen, Mister, Uncle's told you all he knows and I've told you all I know. If you want any more information you'll have to get it from Lew Colvin."

"Where is he?"

"Out at his ranch, the Box Bar, six miles out of town. He's there most of the time. You're in a plumb unhealthy spot, Mister Darrell, and I've got Uncle to think about. Good-night, Mister." She was finished talking.

But as Phil turned away, Molly came up to him.

"That's true, what Uncle was saying about Lew Colvin," she said in a low voice. "You watch your step, every foot of the way!"

CHAPTER III

Colvin Strikes

THE INTERVIEW hadn't raised Phil's spirits. It was plain enough that Molly Garrett knew a good deal more than she had been willing to vouchsafe. The "ruckus" might mean anything; but at least Phil felt pretty sure that Dan Hart had gone around through the badlands. And there seemed nothing he could do except follow suit.

First, however, he was determined to see Lew Colvin and have it out with him.

His first thought was to retrieve his horse and ride back to camp, leaving further investigation until the following day. His next, to see if he could learn the exact location of the Box Bar ranch.

With this purpose in view, he turned into one of the saloons that lined the main street. The bar was crowded with punchers; through an arch behind it Phil could see the gambling going full swing. Poker, faro and roulette were in progress and men were standing three deep around the tables.

Phil ordered a drink and watched the crowd at the mahogany. It seemed to him that they were watching him, too. This opinion was confirmed when a drunken waddy, moving past him as he had his glass in his hand, gave him a jostle that spilled the contents over the bar.

Snickers came from the men on the right and left of him, and a guffaw from the puncher. Phil realized he had been under observation all the while he was in town. And he wasn't going to be drawn into a brawl, with so much at stake.

He drained the remnants of his glass—and at that moment his eyes caught those of a man behind him in the mirror behind the bar. It was obvious that they were conveying some message to him. Phil set down his glass and pushed back through the crowd, made his way out through the batwing doors. He heard the same snickering behind him. But, as he expected, a moment later the other man joined him. He was a short, bow-legged puncher. He glanced at Phil and passed

him. Phil followed, into a doorway.

"Lew Colvin's willin' to see yuh," said the man. "Yuh'll find him in back of The Golden Shower acrost the street and down a ways."

"He sent that message?"

"He sure did. And watch yore step, Mister. Lew strikes like a sidewinder. Ef he hadn't give orders yuh wasn't to be harmed, yuh'd never have got outer that saloon alive."

"You don't seem to love Colvin."

"Love him? No, Lew ain't what yuh might call loved, seein' he's run all the independent ranchmen outer business. But that ain't hyar nor thar. You go see him and don't let him git behind yore back."

"Happen to remember Dan Hart, who passed through here two weeks ago?" asked Phil.

The other's eyes seemed to film. "Naw, I never heerd of him," he answered.

PHIL found the saloon. A big, tough-looking hombre was loafing near the entrance. He gave Phil a searching scrutiny as he approached, but did not accost him. Phil found the side-door open, and went along a hallway, through one wall of which came the shouts of men and the eternal click of the roulette ball. A door at the end of the passage stood ajar. Phil was about to enter, when he heard the sound of voices within, in altercation.

He heard the name Sim Boyce. A second man was saying: "You've got the layout, Sim. Damn it, Boyce, haven't I always played square with you?"

"I'm scared of Tom Garrett, Lew," answered the foreman. "Yuh never had that hombre right. Yuh think he's jest an old drunk and I tell yuh he's in cahoots with all them independents yuh put out of business. I'm through with playin' yore game, Colvin, and I'm aimin' to quit."

"You've lost your nerve, Sim!" came Colvin's rasping tones. "Hold on till we clean up this matter we've got on hand and you'll be sitting pretty."

"Which I heerd yuh say before, several times, Colvin, the last bein' when Dan Hart—"

"You don't need to raise the roof, Sim!" protested the other. "Just as soon as I've disposed of the business in hand, you'll get your pay, arrears and all. As for Garrett, he's an old fool and I've got too much on him for him ever to try to doublecross me! And I think you'd best get out of here in case that other fool, Darrell, gets my message and comes barging in."

"All right!" snarled the foreman. "But I'm tellin' yuh plain, Colvin, this is my last play, and arter that it's goin' to be a showdown."

He stamped across the room. Phil, standing against the wall of the passage, expected him to come out next instant; that would be the showdown. But Sim Boyce was opening another door of the room, evidently in the rear. Phil heard it slam behind him.

He went noiselessly back along the corridor and waited for two or three minutes, so that Colvin might not suspect he had overheard the conversation. Then he stamped noisily back and knocked loudly on the door.

"Come in!" called Colvin.

Phil pushed the door open and entered.

COLVIN was sitting at a desk. He was a heavy man in his middle forties, balding, with a drooping mustache that looked yellow in the lamplight. In one corner of his mouth was an unlighted cigar stub with a rim of gray ash. A swift glance around the small room showed Phil that nobody else was there; there was no danger of a trap. The door by which Boyce had left was behind Colvin.

"I'm Darrell," said Phil. "I got your message. I was aimin' to see you anyway. You're playin' a losing game, Colvin. There's a quarter million steers on the way north toward the railroad line. Think you can stop them all?"

"Speak for your own outfit, Darrell. Baxter Springs ain't the only Kansas town that wants to keep Texas fever away from its cattle. I guess there's enough towns to handle all the steers in or out of Texas."

"There's no Texas fever in my herd,"

said Phil. "But that's not here or there. Where's Dan Hart?"

"Ought to be well on his way to Quincy by now," said Colvin casually. "He saw the point and went around through Missouri."

Phil was thinking that wasn't like Dan Hart. The old ranchman had lived a fighting life, never backed down before any man. True, they'd agreed to pay toll to get their cattle through but, if Dan had gone around through the badlands, at least he'd have made certain that he, Phil, would be informed of it.

Swallowing his pride, Phil said: "Suppose you make your price for passin' me through this town, Colvin. I take it you've got some price. If it's above my limit, I'll take my own steps."

There was a half-smile, half-sneer on Colvin's face. "There is no price," he answered. "Neither Baxter Springs nor me is buying Texas fever. I advise you to go around through Missouri. How Missouri feels about it ain't my business."

"That's your last word?"

"No! If you ain't on the move by sunrise, I've got an order from Mayor Garrett impounding your herd." Colvin pulled out his watch. "Plenty of time, Darrell. It's five past midnight. What's your decision?"

"I'm not announcin' it," said Phil. "I guess that will be all, Colvin." He moved toward the door. The words of the little ranchman came back to him, "Don't let him git behind yore back."

He moved slightly sidewise. He saw Lew Colvin watching him with an ironical smile. Colvin was sitting at his desk, his hands resting on it. The man knew what was in Phil's mind and was enjoying himself. Phil reached the door, stepped into the passage, closed the door behind him. The passage was deserted. His hand upon the butt of his gun, Phil moved quietly toward the outer door. He pushed it open. The man who had been on guard was no longer there.

There was intense conflict in Phil's mind. His whole instinct was to stand on his rights and fight it out. On the other hand, there was his duty to Dan Hart. And it seemed certain now that Dan had given up the attempt to pass through Baxter Springs.

He'd have to accept Colvin's terms. With twenty-five thousand dollars on the hoof, he couldn't afford to indulge in pride. He made his way through the crowded street, shouldering the crowd until he reached the town marshal's office. Here, outside the flaring lights of the town, the darkness was blinding, by contrast. Phil made his way to where he had left his horse.

It wasn't there!

As he moved along the line of horses, groping his way between them and the wall of the building, half believing that he might be at the wrong hitch-rack, a flash of blinding light shot through his eyes; he heard the roar of a gun. Staggering back, he felt a second slug graze his forehead. Suddenly his limbs went numb. He tried to draw but his mind refused to obey his brain. He felt himself collapsing.

He saw two men in front of him; he recognized the jeering features of the marshal, Scope. Then he was down. Through the onrushing cloud of night he was aware of being picked up, carried, and dumped down somewhere. Then the black cloud swamped all consciousness.

CHAPTER IV

Stampede

THERE WAS cold water on his face, a bandage around his head, a hand stroking his cheek. He opened his eyes with a sudden return of consciousness. He was lying on a bed in a strange room, and it was Molly Garrett bending over him. Behind her he saw the little waddy who had brought him Colvin's summons. Near him, sprawled in a chair, with his eyes and mouth open, was white-haired Tom Garrett.

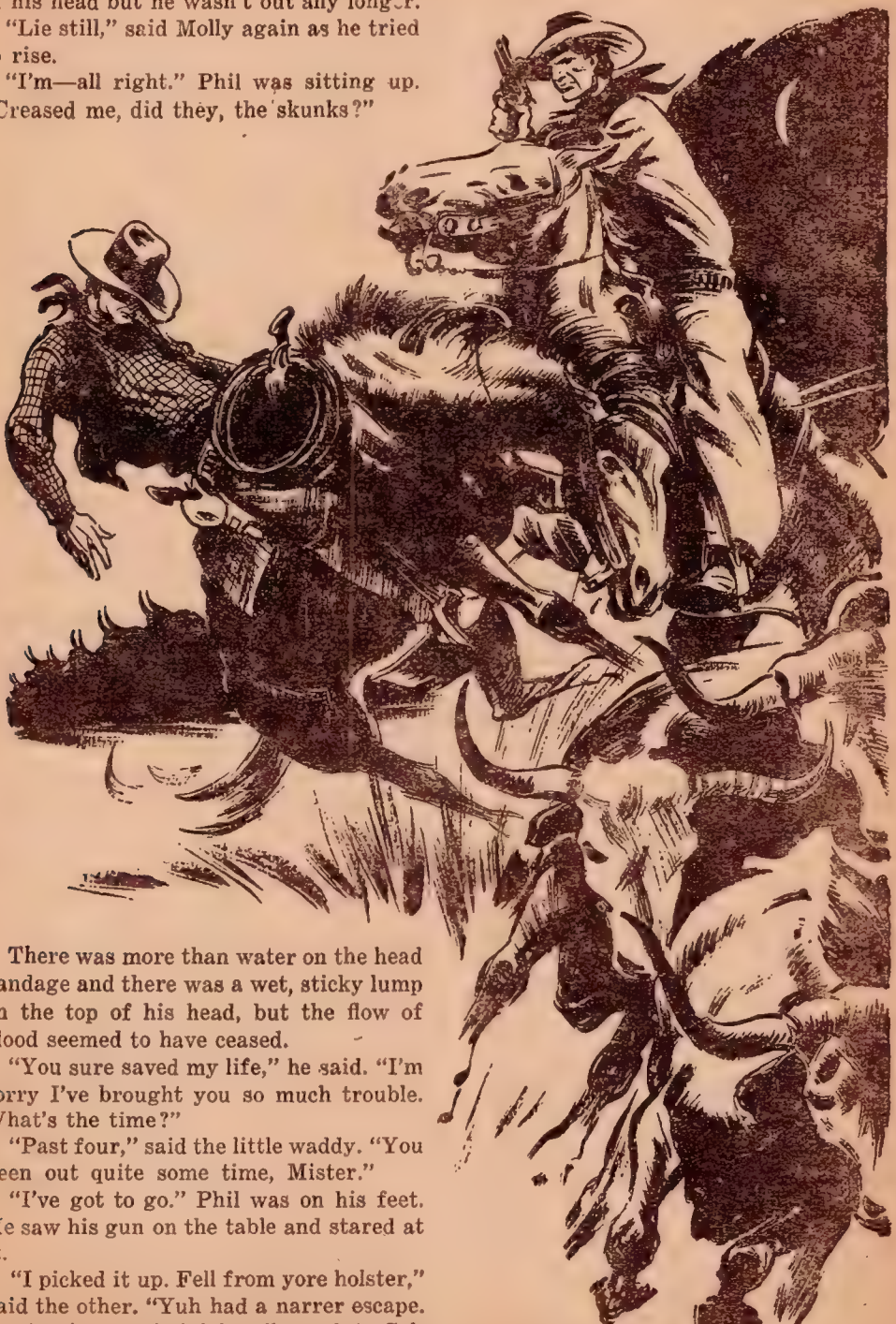
"It's all right. You're doing nicely. Just lie still," said Molly with a sob in her voice. "Drink this, Darrell."

She put a glass to his lips. The liquor was strong; it sent new life through

Phil's veins. There was a pulsing hammer in his head but he wasn't out any longer.

"Lie still," said Molly again as he tried to rise.

"I'm—all right." Phil was sitting up. "Creased me, did they, the skunks?"



There was more than water on the head bandage and there was a wet, sticky lump on the top of his head, but the flow of blood seemed to have ceased.

"You sure saved my life," he said. "I'm sorry I've brought you so much trouble. What's the time?"

"Past four," said the little waddy. "You been out quite some time, Mister."

"I've got to go." Phil was on his feet. He saw his gun on the table and stared at it.

"I picked it up. Fell from yore holster," said the other. "Yuh had a narrer escape. Don't mind admittin' I trailed yuh to Colvin's place and back hyar. Reckon I scared them coyotes away when they might have

Out of the ruck a rider came on, and the horses collided.

finished yuh. But I heard one of them say yuh was dead. Best stay dead fer a while, Mister."

"You can't go!" protested Molly as Phil took his gun and holstered it.

"I got work won't wait. Got to find my horse now and be movin'."

"Your horse is tied at the back of the building. I moved him," said the girl.

"How in thunder did you know my horse, Miss Garrett?"

"Why, because it was Texas-rigged, of course! You're not fit to go and, if you did, what are you aiming to do?"

PHIL explained: "I've got to get back to my herd. If they're not moved by sunrise, Colvin's goin' to start trouble. Says he's got authority from the mayor."

"He made me give it him," mumbled Tom Garrett.

"I've got responsibility to my partner. So I'm takin' my lickin' and goin' around through Missouri to join up with him. And then I'm comin' back to settle accounts with Colvin and Jere Scope."

Molly was clutching at his arm. "You mustn't go through Missouri. You must turn back!" she pleaded, her eyes wild with terror.

"Just why?" asked Phil.

"Oh, tell him he can't go, Shay," said the girl to the little waddy. "Tell him he can't go through the badlands without water."

"That's the more reason for tryin' to find my partner," said Phil. "He's tried it."

There was some hidden factor in the situation—Phil could see that. There was a moment's silence; then Shay said:

"Listen, Darrell, yuh come to Baxter Springs in the nick of time because we're plumb tired of Lew Colvin and Jere Scope and their crowd. Colvin made Tom hyar mayor of the town, aimin' to use him fer his dirty work and make it look sort of legal. Colvin's got a stranglehold on the northern markets and he's drivin' three, four thousand steers a month to the northern markets.

"Five years ago, when he come hyar, he hadn't got a cent to his name. He got together his crew of border ruffians and started rustlin' and thievin' and forcin' us reg'lar ranchmen to sell out to him. And them steers he's drivin' never grew fat on Kansas grass. He got them by stampedin' the herds of little stockmen comin' up from the south, and puttin' the blame on the Injuns.

"Us ranchmen have ben holdin' secret meetin's and we allowed the time was ripe to make an end of Colvin and his crowd. We've found out him and Jere Scope have been wanted these five years past in Illinois, with murder charges hangin' over them, and Miss Molly's got the papers and identities. Been working on them fer two, three years. But she can't use them. So we've agreed to take the law into our own hands. And ef yuh'll go slow, Darrell, instead of blunderin' into a trap, we'll git Colvin whar we want him."

"Why can't you use those papers and get a posse from Illinois?" asked Phil.

Old Tom Garrett sprang from his chair. "I'll tell yuh!" he shouted. "Because everything that the law's got on Lew Colvin, it's got on me too. It wasn't five years ago, it was twenty years ago, when he was a kid and I was a man old enough to have knowed better! And it wasn't in Illinois, it was across the line in Canada, and they got long mem'ries in Canada.

"I'd put all that behind me and almost forgot, when I opened my law office in Baxter Springs! I didn't reckernize Colvin but he reckernized me, and from then on he made my life a hell. And me bein' the only eddicated man here at that time, he picked me for the mayor's job! That's why I told Shay here, it couldn't be done legitimate but, if him and the others took the law into their hands, I'd help them with all the documents me and Molly have been organizing and classifying these two, three years past."

"So yuh see, Darrell, yuh don't want to ride into trouble," said Shay. "I'll git a message through to yore herd fer to turn back. You lay low hyar and Colvin will think yore daid, and then, purty soon—"

PHIL shook his head. "I've got my own hand to play in my own way," he answered. "And I've got a partner who owns a half-share in my steers. And he's somewhere in the badlands of Missouri and maybe hasn't got through them Ozark mountains. So it's up to me to ride after him."

"But you're not well enough to ride," said Molly. She came up to Phil and put her hand on his arm, looking into his face pleadingly. "You must do as Shay says!"

"No, Miss Molly, I'm ridin' now," answered Phil. "And I'll have to ride hard if I'm to get those steers on the move by sunrise."

"I guess you're right," she said in a choking voice. "Yes, I see you've got to play your own hand in your own way, Phil Garrett."

And with that, new strength seemed to flow into him, and with it there came the conviction that he would win through.

"I'm comin' back," he said. "Maybe I'll be back in time to help put Colvin and Jere Scope where they belong." And he turned away quickly.

Phil was about to descend the rickety stairs but a hand on his shoulder restrained him. Shay, the waddy, had come out with him. He led him, instead, into another room leading off the balcony and showed him another flight, little more than a ladder running down to the rear of the building. The two men emerged into a weed-grown lot, barely distinguishable for the high trees that surrounded it, though the moon was high in the sky. A faint nicker came to Phil's ears and he recognized the outlines of his horse.

Shay took the bridle and led the way through a rear exit into a narrow alley. Phil could still hear the sounds of revelry coming from Main Street but here the road lay empty before him. He got into his hull. He was feeling almost all right again, save for a headache. Shay said, "Ride straight ahead and yuh'll be outer town inside of a few minutes."

Phil leaned down and grasped his hand. "I'll be back," he said. Shay nodded and Phil rode on, parallel to Main Street, till the houses dropped away behind him. The sky was still dark but there was the smell of dawn in the air, and a light dawn wind was blowing, rustling the grasses of the range.

His decision to withdraw was the hardest Phil had ever taken, but paramount was the desire to play fair with Dan. If Dan had taken his medicine, he could do the same. Nevertheless an acute and growing anxiety for his old partner beset him.

He was near the top of the ridge when he heard the volley of gunfire ahead of him. Reaching it, he heard the bawl of stampeding cattle and the thud of hoofs on the range. Lew Colvin had anticipated his deadline.

And now, in the moonlight, Phil could see the black mass of the steers spreading out like a torrent on all sides from a central mass.

The firing began again and he sent his horse flying into the thick of it. A bunch of steers came full tilt at him and the trained cow-pony swerved. Then Phil was enveloped by a sea of racing bodies and tossing horns.

He heard the cracking of six-guns away to the right and tried to drive his horse in that direction. Out of the ruck a rider came full tilt at him, the horses collided; Phil had his gun covering the man when he recognized Luke Jones.

He yelled—and Luke tumbled out of his hull, his horse vanishing into the thick of the frenzied steers. Phil leaped to the ground. Then he saw that Luke was dead—had been riding dead, with a slug-hole through his forehead.

CHAPTER V

Through the Badlands

TWO MEN came galloping up, shouting, their six-guns levelled. Phil recognized Eli Rouse, his foreman, and Cherokee. They knew him, stared at him, then down at the body of Luke. Curses broke from their lips.

Eli said: "The skunks jumped us a half-hour ago. All hell broke loose. Nobody knowed where no one was. Big Tex

got one of them but they sure have messed up our drive."

The three were standing by their horses in an open space. The bawling steers were racing into the distance. In the east were the first faint streaks of dawn.

The creaking of a wagon began to be audible. Eli Rouse yelled. "That's Owens!" he said. The three shouted and the creaking began to grow louder. Out of the hazy twilight appeared the chuck-wagon and the ox-team, steady old beasts that were proof against all stampedes.

Owens pulled them in and clambered down. He ripped out an oath as he saw Luke's body.

"Whar's the rest of us?" he demanded.

Nobody knew. Silence had fallen over the range. Only out of the distance came the faint bawling of the steers. Cherokee said: "They stampeded toward the Missouri line."

They were all looking at Phil. He said: "That's where we're bound for. Let's get Luke in the wagon, Owens. We're following the steers and getting out of here."

They lifted the dead man into the wagon. It was fast growing light. Three more riders came toward them—Big Tex, Little, Tex and Missouri. They pulled rein and sat staring at Phil.

He repeated: "We're makin' for Missouri. Today we'll round up all the steers we can find. Tonight we'll be on our way."

Big Tex said incredulously: "Yuh mean yore aimin' to quit, Phil, arter what them coyotes done to us, and arter they killed Luke."

Phil said quietly: "That's the size of it. I saw Lew Colvin. He'll stop nowhere to keep us out of Baxter Springs. Our job is to find Dan and bring him as many of our steers as we can collect."

"We could raise hell in Baxter Springs ef we was to ride in now with our guns blazin'," said Little Tex.

"Yeah, but Dan comes first. I'm comin' back here. I'm not takin' this lyin' down. But our first duty is to Dan."

They submitted sourly. Phil was wondering why Colvin was willing to let the herd go around through Missouri—why his waddies had driven the steers that way.

There was no further attack. Occasionally, through the day, a scout could be seen watching them as they rounded up the steers, but that was all. Fortunately the herd, tired out by the long drive, showed less ornerliness than the generality of longhorns. Also it had kept fairly well together. By the middle of the afternoon the great bulk of the steers had been rounded up, Luke's body had been committed to the earth with such simple obsequies as were possible, and the trail was resumed eastward.

Sullen and vengeful, the punchers hazed the steers along. A tally was, of course, impossible, but Phil estimated that not more than two to three hundred had been lost in the stampede. And another week should bring them to Sedalia, well on the way to Quincy.

They were in the Ozarks now, wild territory from which the Indians had been mostly expelled by arms and treaty, though few settlers had yet penetrated it. It was a land of rugged hills and wind-swept canyons, along which the steers plodded painfully. There was little grass and less water, necessitating a halt wherever a sufficient stream was found. The steers were losing weight in spite of their daily progress being cut in half.

And always there was the anxiety about Dan Hart. Although Cherokee had seen sign where cattle had been driven toward Missouri, this had long since vanished. There was no sign that any trail had been struck out through this barren waste.

Phil was conscious of an increasing coolness between him and his waddies. They had wanted to raid Baxter Springs and avenge Luke's murder; they had yielded with bad grace and were not impressed by Phil's promise to return and square accounts with Colvin.

IT was about the fifth afternoon of the trail that Cherokee came riding into the camp. "I found trail!" he shouted, pointing across a ridge of rock that rose sheer out of the canyon.

They sprang to their horses and forced them through the scrub, circling the ridge until a wide valley appeared before them. It was not ideal range but there was grass in it, and a little bunch of cattle were feeding by the side of a tiny stream.

Cherokee pointed and a flood of unintelligible jargon came from his mouth. He was indicating one of the steers, which he had evidently roped. It lay on its side, pegged out between two jackpines.

They rode up to it. The brand was the Box Bar—Lew Colvin's brand. But that brand was a blot. It had originally been the H, the brand used by Dan and Phil. The blotters had converted it into a Box Bar by simply adding two horizontal lines at top and bottom. The two lines were not yet healed; they were still scars on the hide.

Missouri said quietly: "Looks like they done some rustlin' on Dan Hart's steers, Phil!"

The trail of Dan's cattle stretched backward as far as the waddies cared to trace it. Phil had been travelling parallel with it, probably for days, shut off by the canyon along which they had made their journey.

Phil said: "No use tryin' to haze the steers in here through that scrub and rocks. But this seems to be the way. You, Missouri, and you—" he addressed Big Tex, "—ride back to the wagon. You two will be enough to make the drive through that canyon. Bear to the right as soon as you find an openin' in the wall, and join up with us. Looks like there should be a passage at the far end of this alley. Cherokee and Little Tex and me will stay with the wagon and explore this place. I've got a hunch some of Dan Hart's steers ought to be somewhere hereabouts. It looks to me like a reg'lar rustlers' hideout."

HE called Cherokee and set his horse at a quick lope, while Little Tex released the roped steer. His fears for Dan Hart had become overwhelming but he wasn't saying anything. The breed and he rode on down the valley.

Suddenly Cherokee pointed. The shape of the valley had changed; there was a great curve to the right, like an inlet in a sea. And in the mouth of that curve the two men could see more cattle grazing, bunched together, perhaps two-score of them.

At his feet, Phil saw what had been the man.

Phil turned in his hull, shouted and pointed. Little Tex, who had freed the roped steer, came galloping after them. Big Tex and Missouri had halted their horses on their way back through the scrub, and were sitting motionless, watch-

ing them. Then, instead of obeying Phil's orders, they came on in the wake of Little Tex.

Now Phil could see that the valley opened out into a still larger one, strikingly green in contrast with the arid brown of the ground on which they were travelling. It must be well-watered; all Dan Hart's herd might have found grazing there. At the entrance, the two valleys were divided by a narrow pass, formed by two spurs that came close together. The inner valley was black with steers.

Big Tex and Missouri had seen them and now came galloping toward Phil and his two companions. Their exultant shouts came faintly to Phil's ears as he drove his horse forward. Now they were through the pass, all five of them, and a whole herd of cattle was racing away from them toward the farther end of it. But of a sudden Phil's horse shied, and at his feet Phil saw what had been the body of a man.

It was only a skeleton, clothed in rags, and the bones had been picked clean by the buzzards and coyotes. But, as Phil stared at it, Missouri yelled and drove his horse up to him. At the same time Big Tex, some distance in the rear, let out a yell.

And now, in the slanting sunlight, they all could see the skeletons scattered here and there over the valley. There were about a dozen of them. They were all lying with their heads toward the opposite side of the valley and they had been shot down in battle, for about each skeleton was a heap of empty cartridge cases. And there was no mistaking who the dead had been.

Wild curses broke from the throats of the five as they looked. Little Tex shouted: "Dan Hart's hombres!" There followed silence. It was incredible, blindly incredible that such a massacre could have been perpetrated. And the rage that swelled the hearts of the five rendered them for the moment dumb and helpless.

Then there sounded the sudden sharp crackle of rifle fire, and Cherokee pitched forward off his horse and lay prone on the grass, the top of his head blown to bits by a high-velocity bullet.

Phil's horse reared convulsively and dropped. Phil freed himself just in time to see the horses of Big and Little Tex go down. Now the slugs were whining thickly about their ears. The ambush had been set on either side of the neck of the valley and in that crossfire, life was good for seconds rather than minutes.

And this was the explanation of Lew Colvin's advice to Phil to "go around through Missouri."

CHAPTER VI

Ambush

MISSOURI and Cherokee leaped from their horses, and the frightened beasts bounded away across the valley. Missouri pointed toward the near rim. There was a small inlet in that grassy sea—a narrow space littered with boulders that had fallen from the heights above. Another skeleton lay between it and the five; the man had evidently been shot down while trying to reach it.

This natural breastwork was commanded by riflemen across the valley, perhaps some six hundred yards away, but it was invisible to the ambuscade on the same side.

There was no need for orders; the situation had dawned on the five men instantaneously. They began racing toward the line of tumbled boulders, while the slugs hooted about them. Phil felt a violent blow on the shoulder and went sprawling to the ground. Little Tex yanked him to his feet, put his arm about him and helped him on.

They were nearing the place that offered the only possible stand. A line of great fallen rocks extended across the entire orifice, in places as high as a man's chest. They had almost reached it when Little Tex's grasp of Phil relaxed and he pitched forward among the rocks, a red stain spreading over his shirt, between his shoulders.

Missouri and Big Tex got him and Phil across the barrier. They crouched down. The slugs were coming overhead in a

steady stream and now and again pinging against the rocks, but behind them they were safe for the moment.

Missouri ripped apart Phil's shirt and began bandaging his wound with his scarf. "Straight through beneath the collarbone, and missed it," he said. "Yuh'll be all right, Phil."

Little Tex was shot through the lungs and coughing blood. Big Tex attended to him as best he could and laid him down. He snarled and shook his fist at the invisible marksmen across the valley. With only their six-guns, they could hope to do nothing but sell their lives as dearly as possible when the rush came.

And, since each of the three knew what the end must be, there was no need to say anything.

Their throats were parched but there was no water. They had each his gun and a box of cartridges. The shadows were lengthening across the valley. The firing from the opposite bluff dwindled and died.

Phil felt weak from loss of blood but the wound was not bleeding now, and it was his left shoulder. Gripping his gun, he waited.

THEIR eyes were fixed on the outcrop of precipice to the left. Creeping up behind the shelter of that, the killers would have shelter to within some thirty yards of the rock barricade. If they waited till the dark of the moon, the fate of the defenders would be sealed.

It was twilight now. Suddenly a voice rang out from behind the rocks—Lew Colvin's. It called: "You there, Darrell? Jere Scope's here! He's willing to guarantee you your lives if you surrender on a charge of rustling my steers. Step out, hands high, if you want—"

But that was just palaver. Suddenly the rush came—some fifteen men, yelling and reeling drunkenly as they raced across the little open space for the barricade, their rifles clubbed. At their head was the town marshal, Jere Scope. He didn't lack courage for he hurled himself straight against the rocks.

The six-guns crackled. Jere Scope collapsed over the rocks, raised himself, blood streaming from his throat. An inarticulate bellow came from his throat and changed into a hoarse gasp as he slid back in death. That was Phil's slug.

Half the attackers were down under the hail of slugs that the two waddies poured in. Lew Calvin wasn't among them. Only two reached the barricade. Big Tex got one and Missouri the other. Suddenly quiet succeeded, broken only by the moans of the wounded trying to crawl away from the shambles outside the barricade.

"How're yuh feelin', Phil?" asked Missouri.

"Feelin' all right! We held them," Phil gasped. But he was weakening fast. He saw a stain of blood on Missouri's sleeve and a thread of blood across Big Tex's cheek. "How's Little Tex?" he asked.

Big Tex leaned over Little Tex. "How's she comin', boy?" he asked.

"I'm makin' fine. Prop me up and gimme my gun. I s'pose none of you hombres ain't got a swaller of water?"

That was something no one could give him. Phil asked, "How's the cartridges?"

"We kin hold them one more time," said Missouri.

The three lay silent, their eyes strained across the valley. It would be dark soon and there would be plenty of time, before the moon rose, for Colvin's men to complete their work of murder. Phil wondered whether they had discovered the herd on the other side of the ridge, or whether they were waiting to blot them out before taking it over. He was very weak now. His mind was wandering. He pulled himself together with an effort. He was back in the valley, lying behind the rocks again.

Big Tex whispered: "Keep awake, Phil. If them varmints ain't had enough, they'll be attacking again soon."

"How's Little Tex?"

Little Tex, on the other side of him, coughed and whispered, "Feelin' fine, pardner."

Phil must have dozed again. Suddenly all hell seemed to have broken loose, yells and the rattle of firearms. He raised him-

self. A figure came running at him.

"Don't shoot, Phil! I'm Missouri! We're all right, Phil, we're all right!"

AGAIN a brief period of unconsciousness. Then he found himself lying on a blanket in the middle of a group of men. There, in the fading twilight, he recognized Missouri and Big Tex. And Shay, the waddy from Baxter Springs. And Tom Garrett, the mayor, in black coat and chaps. Tom was no longer soused and he had a carbine in his hand.

"Lay still and rest," said Shay. "We've got them cold."

"Who got them?"

"Us independents. Didn't I warn yuh to go slow? So, when yuh wouldn't, we formed a posse and went arter Lew Colvin and his crowd. They wuz trailing' you, and we was trailin' them. We got all that ain't dead, includin' Colvin."

"How's Little Tex?" Phil asked.

"Looks like he'll live," answerd Big Tex. "Now you lay still."

But Phil staggered to his feet and pushed his way to where a group of men were gathered in a circle, inside which were the prisoners, hog-tied, among them Lew Colvin.

He rasped to Tom Garrett, "You pulled a quick one and I'm ready to come to terms! But go slow, Garrett. I guess you understand! If I swing, you'll swing too."

"String them up!" shouted one of the posse, and others took up the cry. "No use burdenin' ourselves bringin' that crowd into Baxter Springs! Besides—"

He stopped. But all understood his meaning. The partisans of Colvin were still strong enough in Baxter Springs to insure his rescue and an ugly time for his captors.

They turned to Phil, simultaneously. "It's yore say, Mister," one of them announced.

Phil said, "I had a pardner, Dan Hart. These coyotes shot him down, and his boys, in cold blood. Their bones are in this valley. I'd say let them go, provided they don't show their faces in Baxter Springs again, but as for Colvin, he deserves no mercy."

Colvin sat still, a sneer upon his face. He looked at the mayor. "I told you I'll come to terms, Garrett," he said. "But if you murder me, my foreman's got the goods on you."

"That's where you're wrong, Colvin," said Tom Garrett. "Boyce has made a full confession—and I've got him in jail at Baxter Springs."

A stream of curses came from Colvin's lips. The waddies watched him curiously. There was no pity in their hearts but it was queer to see the big man hog-tied and helpless like that.

There was a movement in the crowd. A man was worming his way forward on hands and knees. Now he was in the front of the crowd. He didn't speak but a six-gun in a steady hand was covering Colvin.

The ranchman stopped cursing, let out a yell of fear as the six-gun cracked, then slumped in his ropes, drilled clean through the head.

"Dan Hart!" yelled Phil.

The grizzled old ranchman wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Yeah, that's me," he said. "Got away with a broken laig. Colvin thought I was daid. Laid up among the rocks. I knowed yuh'd be on the job, Phil. But I got mighty hungry, livin' on raw rabbit, and I might have bruk more bones, inchin' down to jine in the fight. Glory, Phil, we've got our herds and we'll make Quincy yet!"

Phil was thinking he'd make a stop at Baxter Springs on the way back from Quincy.

SURE! THAT'S WHAT WE SAID:

SPEED WESTERN STORIES

MANDAN BRIBERY

By JOHN LATANE

VOLUNTARY TORTURE has its place in the ceremonies of most primitive peoples and the American Indians were no exception. Among the Mandans, whose earth-ledge villages dotted the area around the upper Missouri River, almost every male above the age of ten bore the scars of torture inflicted in the course of the rituals of their two-day Okeepa, during which tortures much like those of the Sun Dance of the Sioux would be undergone to ensure success on the warpath, as sacrifices in behalf of dead ancestors, or in keeping with promises made to their gods in some battle.

Each Mandan village had in its central plaza a "Big Canoe," in observance of an ancient tradition that once, in their dim history, the Mandans had been saved from a great flood by building a huge canoe. (This legend was considered important evidence in support of the belief of many white men that the Mandans, some of whom had remarkably light hair and complexions, were descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel.) The "Big Canoe" was simply a circular structure about four feet in diameter made of wooden slabs ten or twelve feet high planted in the ground.

In the Okeepa, the drummers would start things by pounding their drums and chanting, while some woman who had lost a relative in battle, with her hair cut short and bearing bloody gashes in her body as signs of mourning, would set up a loud lament. Dancers, hideously painted and wearing buffalo heads, would leap about the Big Canoe, imitating the motions of buffalo. As the drum-beats became faster, the drummers would suddenly rush into the Medicine Lodge, followed by the youths who were to undergo the torture.

In the Medicine Lodge a pole would have been set up, from it dangling a number of long cords. A suppliant, smeared with white clay from head to foot, would kneel by the pole and one of the elders of the tribe would seize the skin of his chest and plunge a knife through it, making two openings with a strip of skin between. A wooden skewer would then be inserted through these openings. To each end of the skewer a cord from the pole would be attached. The suppliant would then throw himself violently backwards, attempting to break the skin. The skin would stretch out several inches as he pulled and jerked about the pole. Frequently the victim fainted from the pain before, after many minutes, he managed to break the skin.

Other suppliants would have skewers inserted through the skin of their backs and then be hung from scaffolds until the skin, which would sometimes stretch a foot or more, would finally break. And some would race round the Big Canoe, dragging four to ten buffalo skulls by lines attached with skewers to their backs.

At the end of the ceremonies, all the skewers, cords, buffalo skulls and everything else used in the tortures would be placed in the Big Canoe and would be from then on considered sacred.

Despite this bloody propition, the gods evidently looked with disfavor on the Mandans, for in 1837 smallpox, brought upriver by the white traders, almost wiped them from the earth. Only thirty families survived.

TRIGGER GUY FROM ALKALI

The rifle that had been leaning against the coach slid to the ground, and a rear wheel bounced over it with a rush.

SOLO McGLONE was scanning the reward bulletin on the log wall of the stagecoach station at Lusk. His mind was troubled. Twin creases appeared between his sandy brows as he studied the bulletin. To his friends—and enemies—he was known as The Trigger Guy from Alkali. He always played a lone hand. And he played it very well.

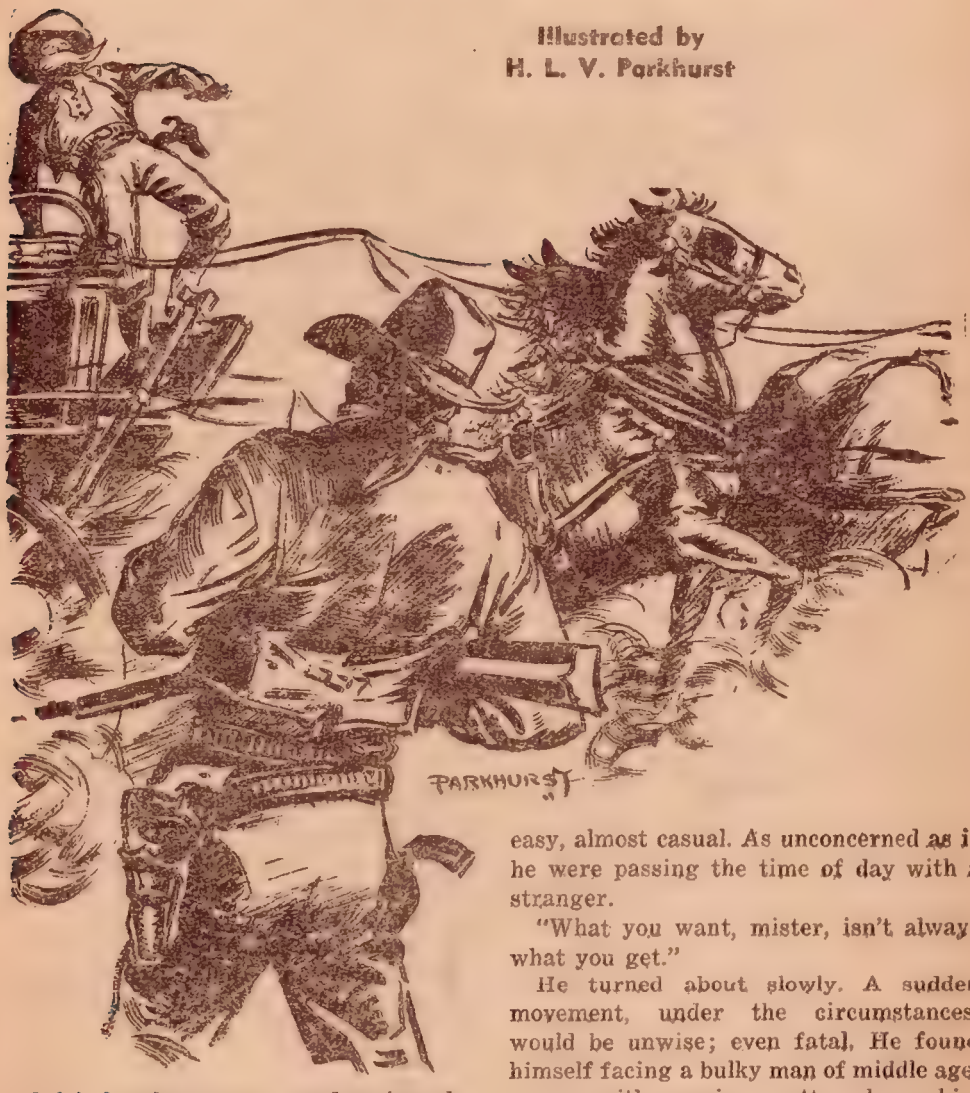
A heavy hand descended on his shoulder. His heart leaped. His every muscle froze. He stood tense, motionless, waiting.

"I want you, son." The voice from behind him was deep, rumbling, determined. "I want you . . . bad!"

Solo knew there were other ways of cheating the undertaker than by clawing the clouds—other ways for hombres who could think fast and drive hard and shoot straight. That was why he didn't forget—when the chips started to fall—that there was one critter who was known far and wide as Trigger Guy from Alkali!

By LARRY CAMERON

Illustrated by
H. L. V. Parkhurst



Solo's hazel eyes narrowed ominously. The muscles bunched on his lean, steel-trap jaws. The thumb of his right hand was hooked in his belt, just above his holster.

But when he spoke his voice was soft, easy, almost casual. As unconcerned as if he were passing the time of day with a stranger.

"What you want, mister, isn't always what you get."

He turned about slowly. A sudden movement, under the circumstances, would be unwise; even fatal. He found himself facing a bulky man of middle age, a man with graying mutton-chop whiskers. The fellow was wearing a broad-brimmed black hat, a black coat, a plaid waistcoat traversed by a heavy gold watch chain. He was studying Solo's bronzed features intently.

"Recognized you the minute I laid eyes on you. Description fits you like a pair of Justin boots. You're that trigger guy from Alkali."

Solo's tensed muscles relaxed. The stepped-up beating of his heart slowed down. He grinned. It was an easy, friendly grin, but still a keep-your-distance grin.

"And I," he remarked softly, unhurried, unperturbed, "I recognized you, mister, from the minute I laid eyes on you. Nobody else in Wyoming would have crust enough to wear a cockeyed vest like that. You're Dollar Dick Bascombe. You're the top man, the high-roller, the boss man of the Cheyenne-Deadwood stagecoach line."

"So they say, so they say." Dollar Dick's beefy red face was split by a sudden grin. The heavy hand that had closed on Solo's shoulder now patted him on the back. He held open the batten door of the log stagecoach station. "Step into my office son, I have a job of work for you."

Solo stepped inside. His dust-coated face betrayed none of his inward elation. A job of work! Dollar Dick was the very man he had come to see and he was offering him the very job he had hoped to get!

"Thanks, mister." Solo wanted that job more than he'd ever wanted a job before. But he knew better than to appear too eager. His cue was to appear to be hard to get. "I have a couple dollars to jingle together in my pocket. Why should I work?"

He tossed his dusty hat on Dollar Dick's desk. He straddled an unpainted chair, folded his arms across its back.

"You'll like this job, Solo. It's something that nobody this side of Powder River could get away with. Have a drink —of water. The bucket and the dipper's right beside you."

SOLO looked about the office. It was barren enough, with its mud-chinked walls of unpeeled logs. A distillery calendar hung behind the big-bosomed iron stove. A huge iron safe, with garlands of roses painted on its black door, stood behind Dollar Dick's desk. On the desk was a glass-encased pair of scales for weighing gold dust.

"Nice layout you have here." Solo peered through the back window at the wagon-yard and log stables. "Plenty folks travelling the Cheyenne-Deadwood route these days. Plenty gold being shipped out of the Black Hills to the Union Pacific at Cheyenne. Plenty profit for Dollar Dick."

"Profit?" The red-faced owner of the stagecoach line grew almost apoplectic. He slammed his black hat on the floor. Solo thought he was going to jump on it.

"Profit? With two gold shipments knocked off by road agents in two months? If this keeps up, I stand to lose the contract. They'll ship out the gold by the eastern route! Where'll that leave me? I ask you. Where?"

A faint smile played about the corners of Solo's cracked lips. He slapped the dust from his J. B. hat and shaped a new crease in it.

"So that's why you're offering me a job on a platter. You want a gent who can drive hard, think fast, and shoot straight."

A smile betrayed Dollar Dick's feeling of satisfaction. "So you'll take it? You can start tomorrow."

The offer was just what Solo wanted. It was what he had come to Lusk to get. But he yawned and pretended indifference.

"I sort of aimed to look around a spell, mister. Never been in this part of the country before. There's one big drawback about hiring out as a stagecoach jockey. You can't wear spurs."

"I'll make it worth your while to take off your spurs, son." Dollar Dick leaned forward, arguing earnestly. "Double wages. Twenty-four-hour layoff every third day."

Solo shrugged. He pretended he was not interested.

"Forgot to mention, didn't you, that two of your drivers on the Lusk-Deadwood division checked out by the bullet route in two months? A dead man can't spend double wages, mister. I've never taken to the idea of being dead."

Dollar Dick drew a fat cigar from his black frock coat. He bit off the tip savagely.

"That doesn't sound like the trigger guy from Alkali. Not like the gent I heard tell about. They say Solo McGlone craves the smell of gunsmoke. They say the man isn't born who can throw a scare into him. Not even—not even Spook Chittle."

Solo chuckled softly. Things were breaking his way.

"Just what would it be worth, mister, if I brought you the pelt of Spook Chittle?"

The fingers of Dollar Dick's right hand closed slowly until his fist was clenched.

"One thousand dollars, gold."

Solo needed the money. But he couldn't appear too eager.

"Penny ante stuff." Deliberately he prodded the man he knew would soon be his boss. "Already Spook has knocked off two gold shipments. Fifty, sixty thousand dollars, maybe. If he does it again, you stand to forfeit your contract. You'll go bust."

"Two thousand!" Dollar Dick's mutton-chop whiskers quivered. Solo knew he had reached the limit. Because of the tintype Solo carried in a leather folder in his shirt pocket, he'd have taken the job for nothing more than his keep, if necessary. But it wasn't necessary. He grinned and held out his hand.

When do I go to work, boss?"

DOLLAR DICK heaved a huge sigh of relief. A broad smile spread from one mutton-chop whisker to the other.

"Deadhead through on the night coach to Deadwood. Report tomorrow to Stud Calley. He's superintendent of the northern division." Plainly vastly relieved, the coach-line owner rose from his desk, indicating the interview was at an end.

Solo reached for his hat. "By the way, boss," he remarked, "at your division headquarters at Deadwood you've got a girl bookkeeper named Dorcas Iliff, haven't you?" He hoped his query would not hint at the real reason he had come to Lusk from Rawhide. It was Dorcas' tintype that he carried with him in the leather case. "I used to know her at Alkali."

Dollar Dick snorted. "If I knew you was interested in Dorcas, I wouldn't have offered you double wages, son. Now get out of here. And remember, I'm paying you to get those gold shipments through safely; not to waste the time of the prettiest bookkeeper in Dakota territory!"

Solo grinned and went outside and stabled his horse, and hunted up a restaurant and grabbed himself off a bait of grub. Within an hour he was seated on the stagecoach box alongside the sad-eyed, stooped Lafe Pinkerton, the regular driver. During the time Solo was deadheading through, he spent most of his time questioning the driver and studying the lay of the land.

On the southern leg of the division the country, he determined, was too open to afford protection to road agents. At the crossing of the Cheyenne river, Lafe used his whip to point out the spot of the most recent stage holdup.

"Spook Chittle and his boys holed up and waited till the coach was pulling out of the soft sand. Driver, he tried to whip up the horses." Lafe paused and spat between the nigh and the off horse. Presently he added, "He's buried over yonder under them cottonwoods."

The road entered the Black Hills through narrow, rocky Hackamore Gulch. With his whip, Lafe pointed out The Narrows. Here the highwaymen had felled a tree across the road to halt the coach.

"Driver grabbed for his gun." Lafe cracked his whip over the heads of the straining team. "Stopped three slugs. Lived two days."

Solo was working out a plan of action for future use. What if he were to find the road barricaded at The Narrows? Would he grab for his gun? Would he become bullet bait?

"What kind of a looking gent is this Spook Chittle, Lafe?"

The driver hunched a noncommital shoulder.

"Never saw him. Hope I never do. If I do, I aim to reach for the sky. What's more, I'll keep reachin' till he's plumb

out of sight. Don't aim to be guest of honor at a funeral."

Neither, thought Solo, *do I. But there are other ways of cheating the undertaker than by clawing the clouds. Other ways, that is, for an hombre who can think fast, drive hard, shoot straight.*

He wasn't trying to cheat Dorcas Iliff out of the man who, he fervently hoped, would be her husband someday.

CHAPTER II

"Night Run"

STUD CALLEY, super of the Deadwood division, was young, chunky, energetic. He wore a tiny, foppish, black goatee. Solo didn't like him.

"The trigger guy from Alkali, eh?" They were standing in front of the false-front frame terminal of the stagecoach line in the long, narrow, twisting Deadwood street. Every business building boasted a false front, striving to stretch a single story into the appearance of two. Stud looked up after reading Dollar Dick's letter of introduction. He sized up the new driver and held out a cordial and welcoming hand.

"We sure need a few gents like you, Solo. I need you right now. Tonight. One of our boys is laid up with a crushed foot. Horse stepped on it after the lad was bounced out of O'Rourke's Palace of Chance."

"Fair enough." Solo's agreement lacked enthusiasm. He'd been counting on spending the evening with Dorcas.

"Better grab a bite to eat," advised the super. "You'll be pulling out at ten o'clock."

Solo asked, "Will the coach be carrying a gold shipment?"

Stud fixed a boring gaze on his new driver. He tapped him on the chest with a forefinger.

"That's a question no driver asks, fella. Not ever. It's better for our drivers and for everybody concerned, if they don't know what's in the express box. Then, if anything happens, they're in the clear. Can't be accused of tipping off the stick-ups."

"Good idea," agreed Solo readily. "Smart thing to do. The fewer who know it, the better. You won't find me asking fool questions any more, Stud."

"You're catching on, fast," the super assured him with a knowing smile. "Understand, it isn't any reflection on our drivers that we don't tell 'em when the gold is going through. It's your duty to figure that every shipment is a gold shipment—and to protect it accordingly. . . . The best steaks are across the street at the Silver Hills beanery. See you at ten o'clock. So long."

SOLO wolfed down his meal and washed his face and slicked his hair, and went to Dorcas' boarding house to surprise her. His knock was answered by the girl's brother, Jed. Thin and stooped and pallid, and considerably under medium height, Jed seemed genuinely glad to see him.

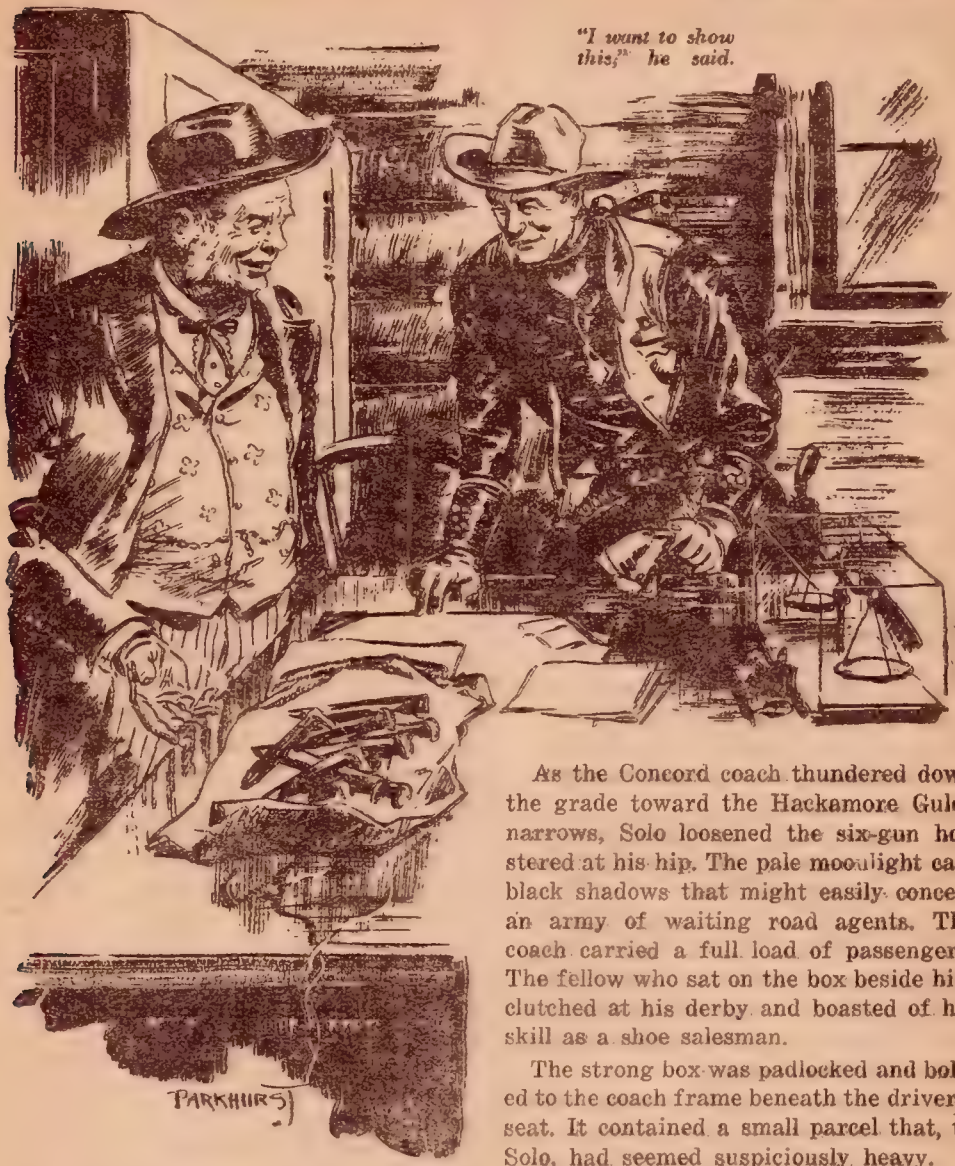
"Solo McGlone! Thought you were still in Alkali! Put her there, *compadre!*" His hand felt cold and bony as Solo shook it.

Solo might never had come to Deadwood, had it been for Dorcas' brother. Working in the mines at Blackhawk, Jed had developed a case of "the puffs", or miner's consumption. So Dorcas had come from her home back east in Nebraska to care for him. She had taken him to Alkali, where the dry air and sunshine had partially restored his strength. There Solo and Dorcas had met.

Only two months ago Jed had found a job at Deadwood, working for the stagecoach line at his former trade of wheelwright. Dorcas had accompanied him and had gone to work for the stage line as a bookkeeper. When she had written Solo that she wasn't coming back to Alkali, there was nothing for him to do but to join her in Deadwood. And here he was.

"Thought I'd drop in and let you and Dorcas know I'm going to be working for Dollar Dick from now on, Jed," he announced. "Where is Dorcas?"

"She won't be home this evening," Jed told him, and Solo's spirits sank. "She just went out for a buckboard ride with a friend—fellow name of Stud Calley, the



"I want to show this," he said.

super. I'll tell her you called. Wish I could ask you in, Solo, but I promised to ride out to the T Slash ranch to fix a shrunk-up wagon wheel."

Solo was depressed and uneasy as he killed time waiting for the coach to depart. His dislike for Stud Calley was in no way lessened by his discovery that the super was courting the attractive Dorcas. As Solo guided the four-horse team down the winding road, he kept wondering if he'd delayed too long in coming to Deadwood.

As the Concord coach thundered down the grade toward the Hackamore Gulch narrows, Solo loosened the six-gun holstered at his hip. The pale moonlight cast black shadows that might easily conceal an army of waiting road agents. The coach carried a full load of passengers. The fellow who sat on the box beside him clutched at his derby and boasted of his skill as a shoe salesman.

The strong box was padlocked and bolted to the coach frame beneath the driver's seat. It contained a small parcel that, to Solo, had seemed suspiciously heavy.

The coach rocked on its leather thoroughbraces as it swept through the black shadows of The Narrows. Solo breathed a sigh of relief as it emerged safely. By the time it reached the foothills, and the open sagebrush country stretched ahead, he told himself all danger was past.

"Hold onto that derby hat," he advised the passenger seated beside him, as the coach approached a dry, sandy wash. "We're fixing to scoot the coulee."

"Not so you can notice it, we aren't!" The fellow's voice was suddenly harsh

and rasping. His arm snaked around behind the driver's back and whipped the six-gun from Solo's holster. Solo felt the muzzle of his own weapon jammed into his ribs. "Jam on that foot brake, fella, or you'll be cold meat quicker'n you can crack that whip!"

At the instant that he barked out his sharp order, four armed men popped up from behind sagebrush clumps on either side of the road. Solo's heart was pounding with excitement and chagrin. He was caught cold and he knew it.

HE WASN'T fool enough to hope that the fifth member of the stickup gang, the confederate seated beside him, would fail to carry out his threat to shoot. And a dead driver protects neither his express valuables nor the lives of his passengers.

The brake shoes rasped on the metal tires as he kicked the pedal down to the last notch. The body of the coach lurched forward as the locked wheels slid in the sand. Solo leaned back and tugged on the reins. The lead span of horses reared in their traces, panicky.

The confederate jabbed the gun in Solo's ribs violently. "Hand over those reins! Reach for the stars!"

A stickup leaped forward and grabbed the bit of the nigh leader. Two others bracketed the coach between them, Winchesters trained on the doors. Someone called, "Everybody out! Hands high! Shake it up! No stalling!"

Hot anger was surging up within Solo —anger at himself for being taken in so neatly. He bit his lip to keep back the hot words on the tip of his tongue. Every fibre of him longed for action. He fought back the impulse to swing at the jaw of the man alongside him, to make one desperate play to wrench the gun from his hand and to shoot it out with the others.

He ground his teeth, raging at his helplessness. Judgment fought with fury, kept him from making the break that could end in nothing but disaster, defeat and death.

A swift glance took in the masked ambushers. The frightened passengers were stumbling from the coach, hands upraised. Directed by the persuasive muzzles of the stickups' guns, they lined up at the side of the road.

The pseudo-salesman snatched the reins from Solo's hands and wound them about the socketed whip.

"Git!" he ordered, prodding him with the gun. "Git down there and line up with the rest!" As Solo started to swing to the ground, the fellow shoved him violently. Solo went sprawling in the dust.

He struggled to his feet, fists clenched but raised high above his head. He meekly took his place in line with the quaking passengers. The holdup on the far side of the coach handed an ax to the man on the box, and then circled the rear of the coach to join in frisking the passengers.

While one masked bandit held the horses, the man with the ax knocked the padlock off the strongbox. Solo surmised Spook Chittle was the man who was barking commands at the passengers. His frame was large, his voice was deep, but there there was little by which Solo could identify him later.

One stickup was working his way down behind the line of passengers, dumping their watches, cash and wallets into a gunnysack.

"All right!" barked the leader when the shakedown was completed. "Back into the Concord, everybody—except the driver!"

The passengers broke for the coach door like frightened sheep. The man on the box held aloft the express package he had taken from the strong-box.

"Give me a hand here!" he called, panting. "And watch out—it's heavy!"

One of the stickups leaned his rifle against the side of the coach. He reached up to take the package.

Here was the break for which Solo had been waiting! Unarmed, his chances lacked thirty cents of being worth a damn. But if he could only get his hands on that Winchester . . .!

The gun of Spook Chittle was trained on Solo's middle. But Solo, as he had scrambled from the ground, had risen

with both fists filled with sand and dust. Now he flung it full in the face of the boss bandit. Then he hurled himself toward the coach, hoping to snatch the rifle leaning against the side.

He heard Spook's rifle roar behind him. At the sharp report pandemonium broke loose. The startled horses reared and lunged forward. The stickup holding the nigh leader was jerked from his feet. The next instant he went down beneath the flailing hoofs.

The coach lurched forward with a jerk. The bandit on the seat lost his footing, snapped backward, went pinwheeling through the air, arms windmilling frantically.

The rifle that had been leaning against the coach slid to the ground. A rear wheel bounced over it. With every ounce of his strength Solo swung at the jaw of the fellow reaching for the express package. The impact sent the bandit reeling.

Solo was aware of another sharp report, another sudden spurt of orange flame. It was, he guessed, from the .30-30 of the half-blinded Spook. It flashed upon Solo that if he remained where he was, with the runaway horses dragging the coach away, he would be left unarmed, to fight it out against odds that were overwhelming.

As the rear end of the coach rocked past him he dived forward. His hand closed on the rope lashing of the canvas-covered boot. He was jerked from his feet with a jolt that almost wrenched his arm from its socket.

CHAPTER III

"Hero Stuff"

THE STAGECOACH lurched up the slope of the little coulee. Solo was being dragged on his back, his heels kicking up a cloud of dust.

He could hear shouts and rifle shots behind him. He felt the coach slew about as it rounded a turn at the crest of the rise. Inch by inch he began working his grip up along the rope lashings. With a sudden twist he swung himself up until he was free of the ground. With frantic haste he scrambled up the face of the canvas-covered boot and over the top of the careening coach.

He snatched the loosening reins that were twisted about the socketed whip. He leaned backward and sawed at the reins till the frightened horses slowed down.

Risking a glance over his shoulder, he saw that Spook Chittle and his men were running toward their horses. The animals had been nidden in a bend of the coulee a hundred yards from the scene of the ambush.

Solo fought his four-horse hitch to a halt and snatched up his own six-gun, which the planted confederate in the derby hat had dropped after shoving Solo from the coach. He grabbed the express package and tossed it back into the strong-box.

He feared that Spook's gang, cheated of their loot, would overtake the coach and complete their interrupted holdup. If he could only scatter their horses before they could reach the animals, he could forestall pursuit.

He levelled his six-gun at the member of the gang who had been left to hold the horses. But he held his fire. A startled exclamation burst from his lips. He thought he recognized the slender, stooped figure, considerably under medium height.

"Dorcas' brother, Jed!" he blurted out. How could he bring himself to shoot down the brother of the girl he loved?

Instead of firing at the horse-holder, Solo pumped six slugs into the group of horses. The startled animals reared back and broke away from the horse-holder. One limped a few yards and collapsed. Solo was certain at least two others were wounded.

As he shoved fresh shells into his six-gun he saw one of the bandits corner a horse against the bank of the little coulee. It was not Spook Chittle but the stickup who had collected the passengers' valuables in the gunnysack.

Solo saw him swing into the saddle, saw him line out across the bend to intercept the coach at the far side of the bend in the road. Solo snatched up the

reins. He poured the whip onto the four-horse team. The coach rocketed forward again.

But the racing horseman was much the faster. As the coach rounded the bend Solo saw him rein abruptly and fling himself from the saddle in the road, dead ahead. The fellow dropped to one knee and levelled his Winchester.

Solo knew he offered a perfect target for the rifleman. His only chance was to beat him to it. He whipped out his six-gun and blazed away. The lurching of the coach made his aim uncertain. Again and again he fired, emptying all six cylinders at the crouching man. The fellow fired once and pitched forward on his face.

Solo sawed at the reins again. He yelled to the passengers to hop out and retrieve the gunnysack full of valuables. He was certain now that before the remaining stickups could recapture the scattered horses that were unwounded, the coach could gain a safe lead.

THE sun was an hour above the horizon when he wearily brought the coach to a halt before the log station at Lusk. He flung the reins to a waiting hostler. Dollar Dick appeared in the doorway as the passengers, talking excitedly, spilled from the coach.

"I'm sorry, boss," Solo apologized humbly to the owner of the stage line. "I did the best I could. But I lost a couple thousand dollars."

"You mean," barked Dollar Dick angrily, "that the express shipment—"

"I mean," interrupted Solo, grinning as he handed over the express package, "that I let Spook Chittle get away from me. Didn't earn my two-thousand-dollar bonus. Long as Spook's out of jail, I reckon I'm not earning my pay."

Dollar Dick motioned him inside the office. "Son, I want to show you what you saved." He cut the cords binding the heavy express package. He spilled the contents on the deck. Solo caught his breath in astonishment. The package contained nothing but railroad spikes!

Solo laughed shortly. "So that's what I risked my hide to save, eh? Well, fair enough, if that's what I'm paid for!"

Dollar Dick smiled broadly. "Every trip, son, you'll receipt for and deliver a package like this. Most of the time it'll contain nothing but old iron. But every so often it'll contain—something more valuable. Get the idea? Lessens the chance of a tip-off by somebody who happens to witness the loading."

Solo was still chagrined that he had risked so much for so little. But he was forced to admit the shrewdness of the arrangement.

Dollar Dick went on, "The editor of the Lusk *Herald* is out there getting the passengers' story of the stickup. I'm fixing to tell him that you saved the gold shipment too. Thought I'd mention it so you wouldn't be surprised when you read it in the paper."

"I don't want to take credit for something I didn't do, boss. I'm not honing to be a hero."

"That's part of the job you're being paid for," the owner reminded him sternly. "If Spook and his gang read in the paper that the gold went through last night, they won't be likely to make another try for three, four weeks, maybe—until the next shipment's about due. See why we don't want them to know tonight's shipment was just a dummy?"

Solo shrugged and laughed. "If that's the way it is, that's the way it is. But it'll make me feel almighty cheap, getting credit for something I didn't do."

"Forget it," advised Dollar Dick. "After you talk to the editor, better hole up and get some sleep. You're due to take the night coach back to Deadwood and I'm going with you."

Solo was silent and troubled all during the return trip to Deadwood. He had little to say to Dollar Dick, who rode on the box with him.

Was Dorcas Iliff's brother Jed in cahoots with Spook Chittle and his gang? Was Jed the tip-off man? As an employee of the stage lines, was he selling out to the bandits?

A wheelwright might learn when the gold was being shipped—and then again, he might not. But Jed was in a position

to pump Dorcas for information. As an office worker, she was in a position to know when the package containing the actual gold was going through. Solo rejected as unthinkable the lurking possibility that Dorcas herself might be in on the deal. Jed's illness had left them heavily burdened with doctor bills. Jed was in need of money, big money, and Dorcas was just the kind to make any sacrifice to help anyone dear to her.

DORCAS was waiting to greet him at the Deadwood stage station as the coach rolled in. As a matter of fact, half the population of Deadwood was waiting to acclaim him a hero, for word of his exploit in repelling Spook Chittle's gang had preceded him. He felt almighty cheap at taking credit that wasn't due him, but he felt almighty glad to see Dorcas again.

When he saw her in the crowd, he wanted to leap from the coach and take her in his arms. But this was scarcely the time and the place for such an embrace. And besides she wasn't promised to him—yet. He wave at her and grinned, and she waved back.

"I'm so proud of you, Solo!" She beamed as the residents of Deadwood clapped him on the back and cheered him

He backed away, dragging Dorcas to shield him from death beneath Solo's gun.

and offered to buy him countless drinks. She was golden-haired and fascinating. Her smile set his heart a-thumping.

But his eagerness was chilled as he saw Superintendent Stud Calley at her elbow. He was bending entirely too close to her, whispering something in her ear. His expression was faintly mocking and cynical. Whatever he was whispering, Solo guessed, wouldn't be calculated to build up Solo McGlone in her estimation.

But as Solo pushed through the crowd, Dorcas broke away from Stud Calley and pushed toward Solo. Solo's slight pang of jealousy must have been reflected in his expression for she peered at him with a faintly puzzled expression.

"Aren't you glad to see me, Solo?" she asked, and there was a bit of wistfulness in her words. "You're looking at me as if I were practically a stranger!"

"Sure I'm glad to see you, Dorcas." He took her hand and squeezed it. "But all this hero stuff has got me flabbergasted. I didn't do anything that anybody else wouldn't have done. As a matter of fact—"

Dorcas' blue eyes were sparkling as she interrupted. "Now, don't go modest, Solo. I know all about it. Stud told me everything."

Solo had been thawing gradually under her cordiality. But now, at her familiar use of the handsome super's first name, he tightened up again.

"Oh, yeah? So Stud told you, eh? Well, if he told you the truth, then you know—"

"Why shouldn't he tell me the truth?" she demanded indignantly. "What makes you so grumpy, Solo? Is it just because you're tired out?"

He forced a grin. "Not too tired to take you out for a big time tonight, Dorcas. How about a celebration? Just you and me. I don't have to take out the stage till ten tonight."

"I didn't know you were going to be here tonight, Solo. I have another engagement. I—"

"With Stud?" he interrupted savagely.

"Yes, with Stud," she answered spiritedly. "If you're going to—"

"Hope you enjoy the evening!" he snapped at her, gripped by burning jealousy. He drew away from her, scowling.

"Listen, Solo," she protested. "Don't be a—"

"Good-by." He turned on his heel and walked away, seething with anger.

CHAPTER IV

"Deadline Trail"

SOLO DIDN'T KNOW he was taking out the actual gold shipment on the ten o'clock stage. But he guessed this would be the night it would be in the strong-box.

Now that it had been announced publicly that Solo had prevented the theft of the gold shipment, Spook Chittle and his gang, as Dollar Dick had predicted, wouldn't be expecting another shipment for several weeks. Consequently this would be the logical time to send the actual shipment through to Cheyenne.

"This is the time the package contains the actual gold," he told himself as he receipted for the express package at the stagecoach station, "but it's also the time I needn't expect a lick of trouble. Everything should be smooth sailing tonight."

And then an uncomfortable thought crept into his mind. To himself again he added, "Unless, of course, somebody on the inside has slipped a tip to Spook. In that case, of course, all bets are off."

He determined to take no chances. Convinced that he carried a small fortune in gold, he made up his mind that he's be just as wary and cautious as if he were expecting the highwayman to be laying in wait for the coach at every turn in the road.

An afternoon shower had turned into a light drizzle. The coach carried a full load of passengers again. Standing at the door, Solo collected tickets from three outbound miners, a dance-hall girl, an agent of the Indian Bureau, and a black-browed, jut-jawed individual in black hat and frock coat, who might have been a preacher, a politician, a gambler or a medicine-show spieler.

As Solo swung to the box, he found the

seat alongside the driver's occupied by a passenger wrapped in a yellow slicker, and he uttered a sharp exclamation of astonishment as he recognized Dorcas Iliff. She smiled up at him sweetly.

"What are *you* doing here?" he blurted.

She held out a company pass. "Going to Lusk." Her voice was honey-sweet, her manner naive. "I asked Dollar Dick for a day off to take a pleasure trip."

"Pleasure trip? What pleasure is there in riding at night in the rain?"

"Talking to the driver," she informed him evenly. He felt she was mocking him.

He gritted his teeth.

"Get inside the coach," he directed. "You can't ride out here."

"Want to bet?" she demanded mockingly. "Our stagecoach drivers are required to be courteous to their passengers and let them sit where they wish. Do you want me to turn you in for discourtesy?"

He muttered helplessly under his breath, sat down and took up his reins and whip. In a moment the coach was rolling down Deadwood's crowded main street.

"What's a girl to do when a man walks out on her?" Dorcas asked him, smiling provocatively. "You wouldn't listen to me this morning. You interrupted me and turned your back on me and walked away before I could finish what I was saying. You're a very rude person, Solo McGlone. If you wouldn't listen to me then, you've got to listen to me now."

Solo didn't speak. He merely grunted and cracked his whip.

"You know, Solo, you're acting like a spoiled brat. You're sulking like a spanked baby. And all for nothing."

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"If you'd listened to me this morning, you'd have learned what I mean. I was trying to tell you that even though I had an engagement with Stud Calley, I'd break it for you. But no, you wouldn't listen. You jumped at conclusions and stormed away like a cantankerous kid."

Sudden Solo was brimming over with high spirits.

"You mean, you'd break your date with Stud, for me?"

"Haven't I done it?" she demanded soberly. "I'd promised to go out with him tonight. And here I am with you."

HE REACHED OVER and tried to squeeze her hand but it was shoved deep in the pocket of her slicker.

"I thought," she said, lowering her head against the stinging drizzle, "that maybe, since you'd become a hero, you thought you were too good for me."

"Hero!" he scoffed, thoroughly exasperated. "Next time you say 'hero' to me, I'm likely to toss you right off this coach!"

"But Stud Calley said—"

"I don't give a hoot what he said!"

"I'm afraid, Solo, that you're prejudiced against Stud. He's really a very pleasant, capable, competent man. He won't be working for wages all his life. He's gotten in on the ground floor of the GOLDEN EAGLE MINING & MILLING CO. Their claims straddle the mother lode. When they strike it, he's going to be rich. He's going places."

"If you asked me," volunteered Solo sourly, "I could tell you where I wish he'd go!"

Behind them lay the straggling shacks that marked the limits of Deadwood. The first stop, only a few miles from the town, was a crossroads store where the coach rarely picked up a passenger. Now Solo could see the storekeeper waving a lantern. Beside him stood a slender figure wrapped in a slicker, using a ruffled parasol to shield a beribboned poke bonnet from the drizzle.

"Don't know where we're going to put her, Ike," Solo told the storekeeper as he reached down to take the passenger's ticket. "We're full up, but maybe—"

The passenger didn't hand him the ticket. Instead, steely male fingers closed on his wrist. The supposed woman passenger jerked back violently.

The startled Solo found himself yanked from his seat. As he sailed through the air he caught an instantaneous glimpse of armed men bursting from the store. He heard the sharp report of a rifle as he

crashed to the ground on his head. Then everything went black. . . .

As consciousness slowly returned, he became aware of voices.

". . . if you haven't got a saddle horse, unhitch one of the coach horses! Quick! Spook and his boys got away with the loot, but if I can get a good horse, I have a chance to catch up with 'em!" Solo couldn't identify the voice. But the words told him that the surprise holdup of the stagecoach had been a success.

"Yes, sir. Yes, sir." This was the voice of Ike, the storekeeper. "I hope you don't think I was in on it, sir. They held me up and forced me to do it. All their guns were trained on me when I flagged down the coach. I didn't dare do anything else!"

Solo was gripped by a sickening feeling of guilt. He opened his eyes. His head was in Dorcas' lap. Her cool hand was smoothing his brow. He struggled to his feet. The passenger were clustered about the coach, jabbering excitedly. All except the black-browed, jut-jawed fellow in the black hat and frock coat. He was the one who was barking orders at the storekeeper. He was flourishing a long-barreled six-gun. Solo could see a nickeled badge on his flowered vest.

"Who are you?" Solo muttered thickly. His senses were still reeling. He was weaving on his feet.

"I'm the special officer for the Wells Fargo!" snapped the stranger. "You fool, didn't you guess the gold shipment was going through tonight? Of all the dumb, careless jugheads I ever saw, you sure take the cake!"

Ike had unhitched the lead span of coach horses. The stranger leaped on the bare back of the nigh horse. He kicked the animal in the flanks and took off into the darkness.

SOLO felt for his six-gun. It was still in the holster. He flung himself on the other saddleless horse and lined out in the wake of the badge-toter. He was cursing himself for his carelessness. He could barely make out the figure of the galloping horseman ahead of him.

And then he was suddenly aware that the fellow had reined in, had flung himself from his horse. He waved a warning hand at Solo. The next instant Solo had slid to the ground.

"What is it?" he demanded, panting. They were on the crest of a low ridge. Solo could see nothing in the blackness ahead.

"They've stopped to whack up the loot!" The words came in a warning whisper. "Down there in that cottonwood grove! Got your gun ready? When they light their next match, we'll shower down on them! At the flash of the match, blaze away!"

The words were hardly past the stranger's lips when a faint orange light punctured the darkness. By its dim light, Solo could make out three men kneeling in the clump of cottonwoods. One was ripping the wrappings from the express package stolen from the stagecoach strong-box.

All three men wore slickers. The smallest of the three was still wearing the woman's bonnet. Solo levelled his six-gun.

Alongside him a six-gun blazed, again and again and again. Solo's finger squeezed the trigger. The light of the match was blotted out. He heard a startled oath, a scream of pain. An answering spurt of flame stabbed the darkness and he heard a bullet screaming overhead.

"Come on!" he cried out. The two leaped to their feet. They dashed forward, shooting as they ran.

He could see two men leaping for their horses. The third lay in a crumpled heap, motionless. Solo blazed away again. He saw the fellow in the woman's bonnet stagger. He saved himself from falling by clutching at the saddle horn of his waiting horse.

Solo heard an oath cracking from the lips of the man alongside him. "Shot my six-gun dry!" he shouted. "Don't let them get away!" Solo saw him dart toward toward the body of the fallen man.

The third stickup already was in the saddle. He was pouring the steel into his mount. The animal leaped forward. The horseman turned in the saddle and fired at Solo.

Once more Solo's six-gun spouted flame. He saw the rider slump forward in the saddle. Solo was running now. He raised his gun again and squeezed the trigger. But this time there was no answering report. He, too, had shot the chambers of his six-gun dry. He saw the horseman sagging slowly sidewise. In another moment the limp figure slid to the ground. The horse merged into the darkness, empty stirrups flapping.

Solo turned to the remaining stickup—the little follow with the bonnet. He had dragged himself to the saddle. He dug his spurs into his horse and Solo could see him swaying crazily in the saddle.

Solo broke his six-gun and ejected the empty shells. With fumbling fingers he shoved fresh cartridges into the weapon. But by the time it was reloaded the swaying form of the little horseman vanished into the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER V

"Bad Men Die Hard"

SOLO DASHED forward toward the huddled figure of the unhorsed highwayman, and he held his reloaded hog-leg trained on the feebly stirring form, on the alert for sudden gunplay. But the stickup, he saw as he drew nearer, was mortally wounded. His breath was coming in long, gurgling gasps. A few yards away, where it had fallen while he had been sliding from the saddle, lay the express package.

"Are you Spook Chittle?" Solo was kneeling by the side of the fallen man, still breathing heavily.

"Spook Chittle?" The dying bandit spoke with agonizing difficulty. "That dirty, double-crossing coyote! Not by a jugful! I'm—"

His voice trailed off into nothingness. Solo could see that his jaw was sagging. Unblinking eyes were fixed and staring.

Hastily Solo commenced to search the dead man's pockets. He found a knife, a key-ring, a sack of Duke's, a dozen wooden matches, a tiny rectangle of paper.

With a thumb nail he snapped a match alight. He scanned the paper. It bore the scribbled message, "Gold goes through tonight."

There was no signature. Solo thrust the scrap of paper in his pocket. He heard footsteps behind him, an excited voice calling in the darkness.

"I thought they'd left the express package in the cottonwoods where we first showered down on them, but they didn't! If they got away with it after all—"

"They didn't." Solo said as he shoved the piece of paper in his pocket. "There it is." He watched the badge-toted stoop and lift the heavy package. "Take a look at this dead gent, Officer. Is he Spook Chittle?"

"Let me get a good look." The fellow bent over the sprawled figure of the dead highwayman. "Black hair, broken nose, gold front tooth. Answers the description. Yes, I reckon that's Spook, all right. Nice shootin', fella."

Solo was thinking, "Well, looks like I shot myself into a two-thousand-dollar bonus!" Aloud, he asked, "Could you identify the little gent who got away? The one with the bonnet?"

"I have my suspicions," was the guarded reply. "Let's get our horses and head back to the crossroads station."

BUT the two stage horses, broken to harness and not to saddle, were untrained to stand ground-hitched. Startled by the gunfire, they had stampeded in the darkness. The mounts of the two slain bandits were nowhere to be seen.

"It isn't far to walk," spoke up Solo guardedly. "I'll carry the express package."

"It isn't so heavy," was the suspicious reply. "I don't mind lugging it."

They started back over the crest of the ridge and down the slope toward the road.

"It's my responsibility, as driver of the coach, to deliver the gold shipment," Solo pointed out.

"And it's my responsibility, as agent for Wells Fargo, to see that the stolen gold is returned to the consignor."

Solo shrugged. "You sound as though you don't trust me, Officer."

"I don't," replied the badge-toter bluntly. He whipped out his six-gun and trained it on Solo's back. "Just walk ahead of me, driver. And don't do any sudden reaching. You may be on the level but I have my suspicions!"

Solo was taken by surprise. He kept his hand away from his holstered gun. There was no point in biting off a chunk of trouble. Not when a few words of explanation might settle everything!

"What do you mean?" he demanded indignantly.

Stud Calley has his suspicions of you, Solo McGlone. Somebody has been tipping off Spook Chittle and his gang as to the nights when the gold shipment is on the coach. He warned me special to keep an eye on you tonight. Said there was a good chance you were in cahoots with the stickup gang. Said you might be the inside man planted by Spook for the tip-off."

"I never knew when the gold shipment was in the strong-box," Solo pointed out indignantly. "The papers said it went through on the last trip."

The badge-toter laughed. "Stud told me that was just a stall. Why do you reckon he had me planted on the coach tonight? Because *this* was the night the gold was really going through! He wouldn't have had me guarding a dummy package, would he?"

Looking down the slope, Solo could make out, dimly visible in the darkness, a buckboard approaching the state station at a headlong gallop from the direction of Deadwood.

"They never tell the driver when he's toting a valuable shipment," he pointed out. "I had no way of knowing what was in the strong-box."

"But a certain girl friend of yours did. She could have tipped you. Sure looks suspicious that you didn't put up any fight against Spook and his boys."

"I put a slug through a couple of them," argued Solo doggedly. "Does that look like I'm in cahoots with them?"

"Maybe not. I'm not ready to say yes or no, yet. Maybe 'twas your girl friend. Looks suspicious that she should be riding on the box with you on the night the stage was robbed. Maybe it was a signal."

"She wasn't riding with me the last time." Solo saw the buckboard draw up alongside the coach at the crossroads station.

"Stud tells me she's got a brother, name of Jed. Stud suspicions the both of them."

SOLO was sick at heart at mention of Jed's name. He was convinced the slender bandit was Dorcas' brother. This meant that in all likelihood he, Solo McGlone, was responsible for the death of the brother of the girl he loved—for, from the appearance of the wounded highwayman swaying in the saddle as he merged into the darkness, Solo's bullet had caused a mortal wound.

What if Dorcas were told by the badge-toter that Solo had killed her brother? Would she ever forgive him? Would his hope of winning her be forever blasted?

But as they drew close to the crossroads stage station, he saw a dim figure detach itself from the milling throng and dart toward him. The next moment Dorcas' arms were flung about his neck. For an instant her head lay on his shoulder. She was half laughing, half sobbing.

"Oh, Solo!" she mummured hysterically. "When we heard the shooting out there in the darkness, I thought—I was afraid you had been—"

"What happened?" A booming voice droned out her words. A huge man with gray longhorn mustaches was piling out of the buckboard. On one side of him was Dollar Dick, the stage-line owner. On the other was the super, Stud Calley.

"It's Sheriff Ed Middleton," Dorcas whispered. "The minute you left we sent Ike, the storekeeper, to Deadwood on one of the stage horses, with news of the robbery."

"We killed Spook Chittle and at least one member of his gang, and bullet-riddled another," spoke up the badge-toter in answer to the sheriff's question. "Here's the missing gold." He held up the express package for all to see.

"And who are you?" demanded Sheriff Middleton, puzzled.

"I'm Special Officer Ormsby of the Wells Fargo. Ask Stud Calley, the super. He knows me."

The sheriff turned an inquiring glance upon Stud. The super said, "That's right. He's the Wells Fargo man. I put him on the coach tonight to guard the gold shipment because I didn't trust the driver." He pointed an accusing finger at Solo.

"You don't trust him?" It was Dollar Dick's rumbling voice. It was bitterly indignant. "Why, that's the trigger guy from Alkali! I sent him to you, my own self! Do you think I'd recommend a crook, Stud?"

Stud shrugged. "Maybe he put something over on you. Of course you wouldn't recommend a crook. Not if you knew he was in cahoots with the stickups."

"Suppose," put in Solo quietly, "you ask the Wells Fargo man who killed Spook Chittle, Sheriff. I want Dollar Dick to know that I earned his two-thousand-dollar bonus. And besides, it shows that if I was the one who killed him, I sure wasn't in cahoots with him."

"I killed Spook Chittle," spoke up the badge-toter blandly, to Solo's astonishment. "And whatever reward's coming, you can just hand it over to me."

Solo was on the point of bursting out indignantly, "It's a daggoned lie! I killed Spook Chittle!" But he bit off the words and kept silent. How could he prove he killed the boss bandit? There had been no witnesses. It was one man's word against another's. Besides, there was another reason to keep his tongue hobbled. What if the Wells Fargo man revealed that he, Solo, had mortally wounded Dorcas' brother? That would leave Solo in a terrific jam with Dorcas. All his hopes of winning the girl would lack thirty cents of being worth a 'dobe dollar, once she became convinced he was the killer of Jed. His silence might cost him the two-thousand-dollar bonus. But what was two thousand dollars against the love of Dorcas Iliff?

Dollar Dick spoke up. "I didn't offer a general reward to anybody who pegged Spook's hide on my fence. I offered a bonus to this trigger guy from Alkali and to nobody else! Sorry, Ormsby. Wells Fargo is paying you for the job you're doing."

Dorcas said, "Well, what are we all standing around talking for? Why don't we go back to Deadwood? The coach can't go on without the lead span of horses. Besides, my brother Jed's been working hard all day and it isn't fair to leave him in charge of the office all night."

A sharp exclamation burst from Solo's lips. "You mean—Jed's in Deadwood?"

It was Dollar Dick who answered. "When Ike brought us word of the holdup, Jed was the only person we could leave in the office. I just told Dorcas about it."

A sudden light burst upon Solo. If Jed possessed an alibi, there no longer remained any reason for silence. Besides, it threw new light upon a number of mystifying angles of the holdup.

"There isn't room for all of us in the buckboard," the badge-toter was saying. "Reckon I'll ride in on one of the stage horses."

Solo whipped the six-gun from his holster and jabbed it in the fellow's ribs.

"Like hell you will!" he barked. "You'll be dragged into Deadwood in handcuffs, Spook Chittle!"

CHAPTER VI

"Six-gun Showdown"

SUDDENLY ALL HELL broke loose. The supposed Wells Fargo man, whom Solo had branded as the boss bandit, twisted about violently. For the merest instant before he grabbed Dorcas' wrist and wrenched her about to shield himself, Solo might have drilled him. But ringed about as they were by the gaping stagecoach passengers, innocent watchers might have been winged by his bullet.

Sheriff Ed Middleton whipped out his gun. "Freeze where you are, everybody!" he commanded. He fired two shots into the air. At the blaze of gunfire the startled bystanders scattered like frightened rabbits.

Spook Chittle backed away, dragging

Dorcas to shield him from death beneath Solo's gun. The bandit's left elbow held the express package clamped tight against his side. His right hand clutched his six-gun. His lips were drawn back from his teeth in a deadly snarl.

Solo was left standing in the open. He was a scant six yards from the boss bandit—a perfect target. From the corner of his eye Solo caught a glimpse of Stud Calley making a play for his Colt.

Then Stud's gun roared. Solo saw Dorcas topple forward and plunge to the ground, and suddenly he went berserk.

Even as Dorcas was pitching forward, Spook's weapon spat fire and lead. Solo's ribs felt as if a red-hot iron had suddenly slapped across them. His finger squeezed the trigger.

Not for nothing was he known as the trigger guy from Alkali. Spook, shielded no longer by the girl's body, spun about as the slug ripped through his guts. He plunged toward the buckboard. Again Solo's six-gun belched lead and flame. This time the bullet caught the staggering stickup in the back of the head. It blasted away the entire top of his skull. He dived forward, struck the ground with a thud, rolled over, lay motionless.

White-hot rage still gripped Solo. He spun about to face Stud Calley.

"You killed her!" he rasped through gritted teeth. "You shot Dorcas, you sidewinder!"

"No, no, no!" Dorcas was scrambling to her feet. "Don't shoot, Solo! I dropped to the ground so Spook couldn't use me for a shield!"

But Solo was too overwhelmed with rage to hear her screaming words. His gun roared once more.

But just as his finger squeezed the trigger, Sheriff Middleton reached out and struck down his gun arm. The bullet plowed into the mud at the feet of the white-faced superintendent. The next instant Dorcas was clinging to Solo's shoulder, sobbing hysterically with relief.

Dollar Dick dashed forward and snatched up the fallen express package. "Gold's safe. Spook's dead. Reckon you earned your bonus, Trigger Guy! But how did you know this gent was Spook?"

Before Solo could answer, the sheriff horned in with, "Get inside the store, everybody. I want a written report of just what happened." And when they were inside, clustered around the grocery counter, the officer added, "Got a pencil, Stud? I want you to write down what every witness says." He turned again to Solo. "Well, young fella, how did you know this hombre that lies dead outside was the boss bandit?"

SOLO holstered his gun and lounged on the counter. He grinned. "I didn't, Sheriff. Not till about ten seconds before the fireworks started. I had my suspicions ever since the dying stickup said he wasn't Spook and claimed the boss of the gang had double-crossed him." In terse words Solo told of the clash with the three fleeing road agents. Stud was recording his statement on a pencil tablet commandeered from the store's stock.

"As everybody knows," Solo went on easily, "somebody had been tipping the stickups so they knew when the gold was on the coach. But something slipped up the first night I drove the coach. That night there was only a dummy shipment. The gang had taken a heap of risks and had gotten nothing. They were plenty sore. They blamed Spook. They busted up and from then on Spook was playing a lone hand."

"Stud," asked the sheriff, "are you writing that down?" The super nodded.

Solo went on, "Spook learned that the real shipment was going through tonight. But he knew his former pals knew it, too, and would make a play to grab it off. So he cooked up the slick scheme to pretend he was a Wells Fargo agent, ride the coach and then, after they'd taken all the risks, to high-jack 'em out of the loot. It might have worked, except—"

He was interrupted by a sharp sound from Dollar Dick. The stage-line owner had unwrapped the express package and spilled its contents on the counter.

"Railroad spikes—again!" he exclaimed incredulously. "But this was the night the *real* shipment was to go

through! Somebody had double-crossed—"

"Maybe I can explain," Solo broke in, smiling faintly. "When I frisked the dead bandit after we'd recovered the express package, I found the tip-off note on him. It read, 'Gold goes through tonight.' " He turned to the superintendent. "Got that written down, Stud? It's important."

The super nodded. Solo reached out and took up the pencil tablet on which Stud was making his report, and from his pocket he drew the tip-off slip of paper he'd taken from the bandit.

Stud suddenly leaped to his feet. He whisked his .45 from its holster. He vaulted the counter and whipped about, backing toward the door, gun trained upon the startled group.

"First to move is first to die!" he snapped savagely.

But Solo had been expecting just such a break and was ready for it. At Stud's first move he had leaped backward and reached for his holster. Now he stood, blocking Stud's escape by way of the door.

"Yes," he drawled quietly, "first to move is first to die! Drop that gun! Sheriff, get your handcuffs!"

For perhaps two seconds Stud stood motionless, frozen in his tracks. Then his fingers loosened. His weapon clattered to the floor. Another moment and the sheriff's handcuffs clicked about his wrists.

"There, gents, is your tip-off man!" Solo picked up the pencil tablet and the slip containing the tip-off message. "'Gold goes through tonight.' Compare the handwriting. It's the same. Stud Calley was the tip-off man for the stickups—until he double-crossed them!"

"But," gasped the amazed Dollar Dick, "Stud was my superintendent! I trusted him with everything!"

"And he got a cut of the loot from every stickup Spook pulled," explained Solo. "Invested it in mining stocks and lost it all. Meanwhile he'd been putting up a big front, spending free and easy. When he found himself in a jam, he figured out what he thought was a way to keep *all* the loot."

"How?" Dollar Dick asked.

"T'other night he tipped Spook that the gold was going through, when it was nothing but a dummy package. Thought he could announce the stage was robbed and he could keep the money. But I gummed up his play by saving the package, which Dollar Dick examined and found was a dummy. Desperate, he tried it again, holding out the gold tonight, hoping the stickups would kill each other off and nobody would know Stud himself had kept the gold."

"Well, I'll be piled!" cried Dollar Dick in astonishment. "Well Trigger Guy, you win the two-thousad-dollar bonus. And besides, I'm going to need a new super. How about it, son?"

Solo's arm had slipped about Dorcas' shoulders. He looked down at her, grinning.

"How about it, honey? How'd you like to be Mrs. Trigger Guy from Alkali?"

FIGHTING WESTERN

For many decades the six-gun was law in the vast open spaces west of the Mississippi and from Canada to Mexico. Those were the dramatic great days when men conquered nature and myriad breeds of human renegades with sheer raw courage —and their guns! FIGHTING WESTERN MAGAZINE is a thrill-packed bargain whose contents are written by authors who really know the West, and the illustrations are by artists who picture its scenes as they really were!

CANYON HIDE-OUT

All the cowman's hatred for barbed wire was deep in Ware Ligon but now he found himself on the other side of the fence—in a bitter range war that wasn't begun by greedy ranchers but by a situation that made Ware cast his lot with a losing cause . . .

Illustrated by William Meilink

WARE LIGON urged his wiry dun pony into the mouth of a canyon. The great jaws of yawning rock were dull and somber, a deep russet color in the last rays of sunlight. From their crannies a man might carefully draw a bead without exposing his own person.

Ware turned loosely in his saddle. Twelve miles down the slant lay the bawdry town of Zachary with its crooked rows of mud-walled houses. Two days before, he had entered the border town below there in the brown valley and ever since, the clear, sharp face of Joyce Peterson had strangely haunted him and refused to lie submerged in the niche into which he had assigned her. He knew now, as he sat his dun in the vapory mouth of Peterson's Canyon, that Joyce could never be relegated to the past.

Shadowy movements against the rock below caused Ware's eyebrows to draw

By W. EDMUNDS CLAUSSEN

He felt the weapon buck once, twice, as he ran, and through his mind were running old Cal Peterson's words, "A man's got to fight to live in the world."

closer. Outlines of dark forms crossing between the manzanita and the sharper outlines of the rims.

He counted them. There were three forms on short-coupled, rangy cow-ponies. Mexican rigs.

His hand ran down unconsciously to the Winchester riding beneath his knee. His fingers played loosely over the oiled stock.

They had told him in Zachary that Peterson's Canyon would offer no warm welcome for the gringo.

All right, if hardcases felt so inclined, let them come with their guns talking the forthright language of the brasada!

This Cal Peterson was a queer one, Ware thought as he urged his dun deeper into the canyon. Ware's thin, dark face grimaced as the pony's shoes struck bedrock and the canyon's bare walls took up the clear sound.

Cal Peterson lived ahead somewhere in a crude shanty, with maybe two or three hundred cows that ranged through the brakes. His daughter cooked and kept the tally books and tended all the female chores of ranching. She did her work and held to her own end of the bargain with a firm hand, Zachary gossip had told Ware.

Reading the brilliancy of her eyes and the lines of her lips and mouth, Joyce's mother must have been somebody while she lived. With Joyce and the hard-bitten old cowman lived her two half brothers that Cal Peterson had sired in an earlier match with a Sonora woman. They lived at home here only when no other place offered them a stronger lure.

Gimp and Sol Peterson were tough men to cross. They had inherited some of the indomitable spirit of their father along with the shiftless strain, the sly, guileful treachery of their peon mother.

It took a rugged outfit to cope with and conquer this kind of country.

Ware drew up short to cast inquiring eyes into a bisecting canyon. There was grass in there all right; it was dry and cured but it would be full of nourishment. He could see a few moving brown spots. Herefords! This Cal Peterson wasn't so dumb. Ware felt his pulses run a little faster. He was on the lookout for a valley such as this for himself.

A valley that was hidden from the stream of life, where a man might settle down with a feeling of security and forget the turmoil that ran through more heavily settled places. Run four or five hundred cattle, a few good Hereford bulls to start, and watch them multiply and grow through the years. And then, oddly, the face of Joyce came to him with its character and its wistfulness and its simple, smooth sort of beauty. Yes, with a woman like this Peterson girl a man could settle down. . . .

Ware's heart lifted suddenly. What if this proved not to be a blind canyon, as he had supposed, but a pass instead. One of those old, scarcely accessible trails that Geronimo had used a decade ago. It led onward due south through the heart of the mountains. Southward . . . across the border and into old Mexico!

The natives in Zachary had been reluctant to talk much of Peterson's Canyon. What little Ware knew or suspected had come from his earlier observations through his glasses and from what Joyce had told him in the short stagecoach ride he had had into Zachary. Peterson's Canyon, the Mexicans had pointedly hinted, was a place that could bring no one much good.

He caught a fleeting movement before him on the canyon floor. Some sense warned him and saved him and his spurs touched the dun and drove him in behind a thick rock just as a gun crashed through the canyon. Ware felt the bandanna flutter about his throat even as the dun weaved further behind the rock.

THE Winchester had come up out of its sheath and he was thrusting its blue barrel over the rock when a second shot cracked. Splinters jumped up to bite his face. He caught the hasty withdrawal of a border sombrero between the blackjack, and his rifle spanged hastily at its target. He felt the tug of inward satisfaction when he caught sight of the som-

brero dancing over the bed-rock floor thirty feet beyond.

A rough, lusty cussing took place ahead on the trail. The words came to Ware plainly. "Tore my blamed hat right off my head. Langly, see if you can work along the rim."

Langly. The name ran across Ware's mind. He had seen a painted sign in Zachary with this name on it. Lawyer James J. Langly. Ware called out clearly to those ahead, "What goes on?"

"There he is!" came the lusty voice. "Hombre, you can come out with your hands in the air or with your cutters smoking! It doesn't make a dang bit of difference to me but you better come out before we work you out!"

Ware lay back, considering. He could hear the man Langly moving closer to him over the rocks. Ware tried to find a crevice through which to gain a view but his own rock was solid. His only means of finding Langly would call for exposing his own head and then this other gun would pick him off. He called aloud, "First, who are you?"

"*Me?* I'm Peterson!"

Ware felt relief pull through him. "Wait a minute, Mr. Peterson!" he yelled. "I'm coming out." He threw the Winchester back into his saddle boot and unwound the reins from a bush. "I'm coming out with my hands empty!"

Russet-faced, rough-hewn of frame and feature, Cal Peterson stared at this younger man in black, leading his dun pony up out of the hollow behind the rock and cutting the distance between them. Cal saw a slab-built man whose sharp, long face seemed smooth and emotionless. The man's long arms hung easily at his sides, away from the yellow, bone-handled Colt that stuck out of a tied-down holster. Cal was forced to admit he liked what he saw. His own gun lowered a few inches in his hands.

"What the samhill are you doing in here?" Cal demanded.

Ware drew up, his pony stopping just short of his shoulder. He ran out his tongue, wetting his lips. His cool gaze was running over this raw-featured cattleman before him, studying him, appraising what he found. This was Joyce's father.

"Been looking over real estate," Ware drawled softly.

Cal grunted. "This is my canyon. It isn't for sale."

"I wasn't exactly hunting range in this canyon," Ware amended. "I came in to see your daughter, Mr. Peterson. Can I talk with Miss Joyce?"

THE cattleman swore but the sounds were under his breath and almost inaudible. His piercing eyes were trained behind Ware. "You see that brand on your pony? It's Mex. Where'd you get that critter?"

"Bought him in Zachary. My own horse was shot a couple of days ago when we had a little mix-up with road agents. This one looked like a good horse and I didn't ask any questions."

"Z-Smokestack. Rustled stock."

Lawyer Langly came hobbling down off the rim, a worn saddle gun held in his tendon-corded hands. His face was narrow and shrewd and pulled up distastefully now as he closed in. A hard man, Ware thought as he heard Langly's voice cut in, "That Mex horse nearly cost your life."

Ware nodded, saying nothing. He let the silence build up, pulling the words out of these other two facing him. Cal was stomping back for his hat. He was speaking as though to himself, "Didn't think they'd sell one of the critters this close to the border."

"I'm a stranger," Ware pointed out. "They probably figured on my pulling out."

"Maybe that wouldn't be such a bad idea," Langly said, "if you count on keeping that animal between your legs."

There was a brittleness to the lawyer's eyes that sent fingers playing up Ware's spine. Something about those eyes was vaguely familiar. Langly was early frontier stock. A fighter with his tongue and brain and gun.

Ware was saying quietly, "People

around here seem to shoot first, then do their talking afterward."

Grim-lipped, Peterson was coming back with his hat. He ran a finger through the hole in its crown. His eyes seemed to be saying that Ware wasn't so bad at holding his own in a shooting match. The lips had softened, somewhat.

"You're Ligon," he said curtly. "Joyce told me about it. Come up to the house. You can see her."

"Thanks. Maybe I better mention there are three strangers riding my back trail. It might not mean a thing to you, then again it might."

"We saw them through the glass. Then when I spied you on that horse I thought you were one of 'em. I didn't ask Joyce to look because we didn't want to give her a scare until the shooting was over. Come up. Joyce will be glad to see you. She's done some powerful talking about you ever since the day before yesterday."

The canyon widened appreciably and in the oval valley between the dark rims Ware could see the waving grass through which his pony stepped. A trail led beyond. As he had surmised, it continued through a cut in the fartherest walls.

The house stood tight against the rim-wall. A trim cabin of two or three rooms, built solidly of logs and 'dobe and having a narrow porch runnng around the front and one side. On the other side a newer room had been added of peeled logs. Ware was not surprised to see curtains at the lighted windows. Neither was he taken back when the door opened and Joyce stepped out, wiping her hands on a white towel.

She wore a crisp housedress of calico with short, loose sleeves and a wide opening at the throat. The same well-formed, lithe figure, the same clear, buoyant face fringed with its mass of auburn hair. A little more wistful, he thought; a little more sad.

"You're the one they brought in," she said softly. There was a cynical droop to her lips.

Ware slip-knotted his reins over their rail. "You don't seem glad to see me," he said.

"I am. I was thinking they might have killed you. I am glad, now that you're safely here, Ware."

"It was the horse," Peterson said in defense as his girl's eyes turned to him. "He's riding a Z-Smokestack, girl."

"He had to buy something. His own horse was killed when he fought the stage robbers," she said.

She held the screen door for Ware. As he stepped in he felt the warmness of her fingers closing over his hand. He knew then that he had read correctly the message in her eyes. She was glad to see him. Her voice was low, touched with something almost pathetic, he thought. She said, barely above a whisper, "Oh, this country!"

LANGLY pushed in with Cal Peterson bringing up the rear. The old cowman paused at his threshold, leaning his heavy rifle against the wall.

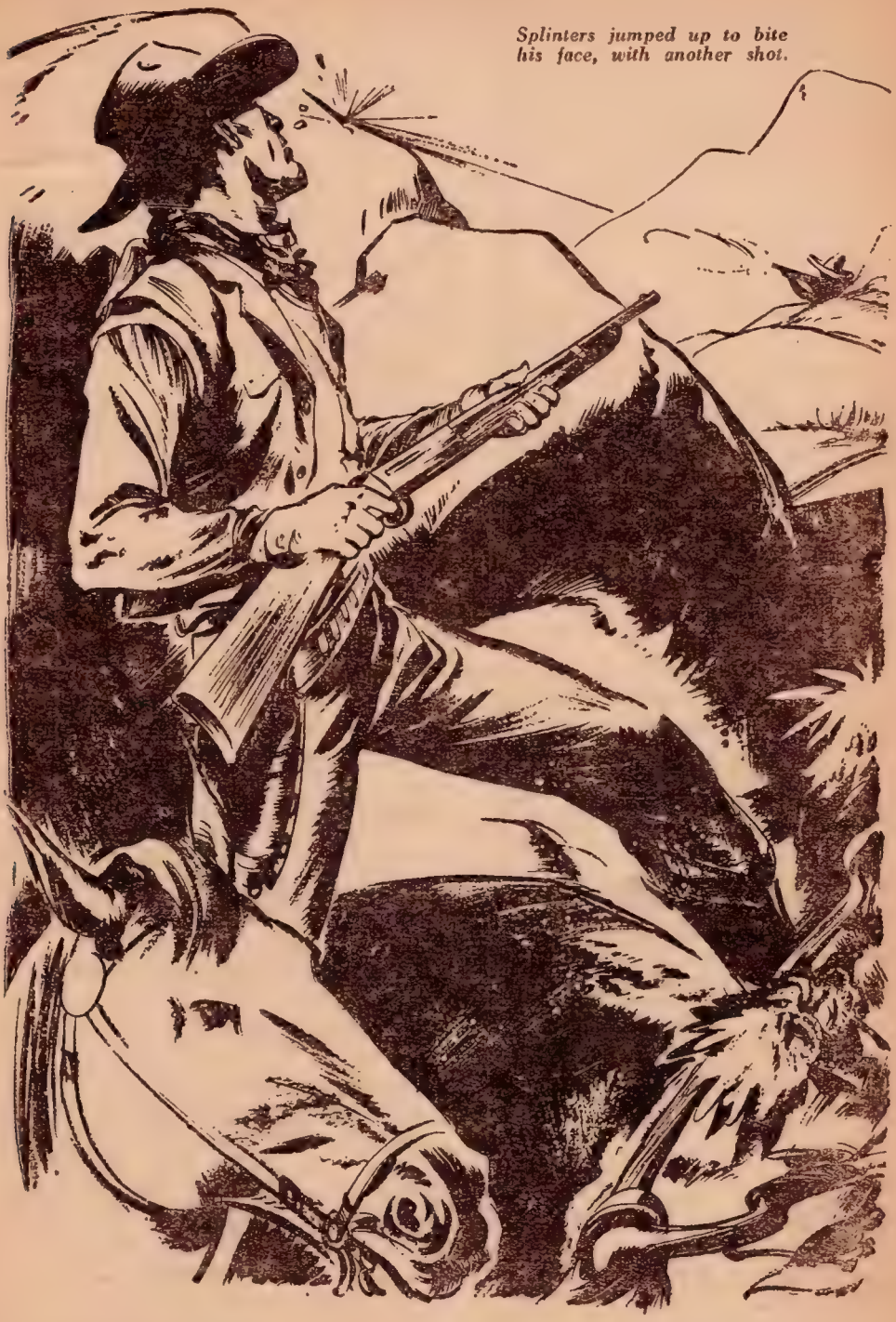
"They won't come in the canyon until it gets dark," he said. "With four guns in here now they won't try to hit us till night. Better get on with the will, James. One of us will try to get a copy into Zachary once you get it done."

Ware's eyes lifted quickly and they picked out Joyce bringing an extra plate from the cupboard. He saw that a pallor had crept over her cheeks. Other than that there had come no altering to the planes of her face.

She set the plate on the pine table, at the end. This was to be his place. She was standing close to him but now she faced the table, looking into the steaming platters of beef and potatoes and the brown rolls.

"He thinks this is his last night, Ware. He thinks they're going to kill him tonight. He's making his will!"

Ware closed the distance, locking his fingers around her bare upper arms, looking into the back mass of her hair. Some of it brushed softly under his chin. Under his fingers a tremor ran through the girl. Then he turned to her father. "Who is



Splinters jumped up to bite his face, with another shot.

going to kill you, Cal?" he demanded. "And why?"

"Some men," Peterson said dryly. "Get that part plain enough about Gimp and Sol, Langly. I want to know Joyce will have this place after I'm gone."

"She will," Langly said. He said it almost fiercely.

"When you finish, read me the part where I disinherit my boys."

From a side table came the faint scraping of a pen. Ware heard a sigh run through the lawyer. Like a somber echo it passed on through Peterson. Joyce was standing still as stone. This room was heavy and quiet and Ware could feel the torment and the agony that was tearing at Peterson's soul.

Ware spoke again and his voice was like a thing alive in the dead stillness; the only thing of animation within the four adobe walls. "Joyce, why is somebody going to kill your father?"

"It's the fence. Last night they cut it and today Dad restrung the poles and sent for Lawyer Langly. Dad knows when they come tonight they'll bring guns along with their wire cutters."

"*Fence.*" All of the cowman's hatred of barbed wire that Ware had inherited from his father was in the tone of his single word. Stub Ligon himself had fought a bitter range war over barbed wire that greedy ranchers had strung around their water holes. A hatred of the stuff had early infiltrated Ware's being. By coming here he had already taken sides and cast his lot with a cause for which he had but small stomach. As though feeling his mental anguish Lawyer Langly spoke from the far wall.

"There's a time and place for Thorn wire. This is it, Ligon. Uncle Sam has strung his imaginary line from Texas to the coast and Cal Peterson has the right to make that line something that you can ride up to and feel. Something that'll stop cattle. Cal owns the land and the water. If he wants to build a wall, that's his business."

"I don't like fences," Ware heard himself saying. "If there's rustling, that's a marshal's affair."

From behind him Cal grunted. "Damn the rustling! It's Mex longhorns coming in to breed with my Herefords I want to stop. There's a hundred good blooded cows down there by the water and every day a dozen tough old Sonora bulls come in and mix. It won't go, son. I won't have my cows throwing poor stock back on my range. I'm fed up with it."

Cattle was part of this thing, Ware's mind was whispering, *but the old man's sons were up to their necks in rustling and using Cal's range in their operations; and dragging their old man into trouble; and he was balking on his hind legs.* Aloud Ware heard himself asking, "Any ranchers beyond? Anybody you'd hurt by closing off your water?"

"Nobody but Mexicans across the border and their tough old bulls can nose out their own water. As Langly says, the fence will keep the rustlers from chousin' their wet stock across to this side . . . like the horse you bought yourself."

ALL at once the stringing of a length of barbed wire seemed insignificant to Ware.

"Run your wire, Cal," he said quietly. "We'll drive off the wide-loopers who aim to tear it down."

A sound from Joyce. He was conscious of her again. "The men who try to tear it down will be my brothers!" She sobbed.

She went out, and in a little time, Joyce was bringing her last platter-full of food to the table and old Peterson came back off the porch with his rifle. He held a sharp gleam to his eyes.

"They're out yonder!" he said hotly. "Sometime before the moon comes up they'll ride down on us. Langly, if I don't finish them, that will ain't worth a plugged peso! They'll take the place from Joyce, law or no law!" His eyes kept running to his hat on a wall peg. The hole made by Ware's bullet looked ominous —and efficient. Cal said suddenly, "Langly, tear up your will!"

"Tear it up?"

Cal stepped closer to Ware, a fierce burning glow across his leathery face. "Son, you've been looking for range. How much is my place worth to you?"

Old Cal had read something in Joyce's face and something in Ware's, Ware thought. He saw it mirrored now in the cowman's hot eyes. Cal knew that if Ware bought the canyon Joyce would come into

it anyhow, in the end. Ware shook his head slowly.

"The range I buy will have to be a peaceful place, Cal. When the old man died I could have held the homestead if I wanted to shoot a way across a neighbor's fenced range. I preferred to take my loss and sell out. I'm tired of war and guns and tired of blood and fighting."

PETERSON'S face clouded over. "A man's got to fight to live, Ware. It brings out the good in a man to stamp down the bad. Man isn't worth a continental, who's too tired to fight."

All this was an old, old story and Ware knew it was true. He could hear over again his father's voice, *A man's got to fight to get what he wants. It takes brains and sweat and a good deal of guts before he can earn for himself a place in the sun.* A sigh slipped out from deep inside of him. Ware knew that if he bought chips in this game he would be getting for himself only a place in which to die.

He said quietly, "Sometime when the tiredness is gone I'll be willing to agree you're right, Cal."

"How much cash do you have?"

"Four thousand dollars."

"The place is worth ten. Langly, draw up a bill of sale."

"I don't want it, Peterson."

"You will, by the time Langly draws up his deed. In the meantime you can think it over. If you ride out tomorrow or the next day and find you don't want it, Joyce can buy it back. My daughter doesn't know it but I killed a man last night when I was riding wire. He was a pardner to Gimp. They went to the same school and grew up thicker than sin. The devil's hitched 'em to the same yoke. Gimp will ride in and kill me tonight. I don't want either of them shiftless whelps to get their claws on what belongs to Joyce."

"That," Lawyer Langly said with a catch in his throat, "must never happen." The brushing of his pen strokes pushing across the paper were rapid. After a time he looked up, the pale wash of lamplight catching one side of his lean, sharp face, "I want you to look this over, Ligon. Then sign it if you want. I'll make other copies."

Thoughts were beating across Ware's brain. He scarcely saw the words that were penned in Langly's flowing hand. His eyes had fastened themselves on Joyce and the picture of her was fresh and warm within him. What were her feelings? He noted the flush that had come to her face.

"Joyce, have you any objections if I buy in the ranch?" he asked.

She turned to face him fully. "Do what you wish," she said slowly. "Don't let anyone talk you into anything. We all have our own lives to live." Her eyes lowered to the board floor. Was she hoping, behind that flushed brow, that they might live theirs together? Long years, after peace had settled down, when they might watch the cattle grow; when they might ride out at dusk together, and watch the canyons take on their vapory glow.

"I'll sign it," Ware said.

He wrote his name hurriedly across one page. As he wrote, a deep silence lay over the cabin. All four of them knew this signature he was scrawling was tying Joyce's destiny and his irrevocably together.

Peterson's boots shuffled on the floor boards. He signed the papers as fast as Langly handed them across. Finishing, he rose from the table and strode toward the door, picking up his gun as he went. "I'll watch from the porch. There are a dozen buzzards in the mouth of the canyon slowly movin' in on us."

"Your dinner, Dad," Joyce pleaded.

Cal hitched a shoulder. "Plague take dinner!" He huffed. His eyes ran across the room to the lawyer's and something passed between them. "I'll eat, then wait while Langly rides to town," he said.

They turned to their food with the sobriety silence can bring. At intervals Langly's eyes were on Joyce. She smiled in return, a little thinly.

What was the bond between these two? Ware was struck by the sameness of their features, now that they sat side by side.

CAL slid his chair closer to the table. A look passed between him and the lawyer. Langly shoved back his chair, hitching his gun belt as he rose. He hesitated behind Joyce and then he stooped and pressed his face to her hair. Ware caught her softly spoken words, "Good-by, Uncle James."

Then Langly was at Ware's side. His sinewy hands reached for Ware. "Ligon, I'll try to get this paper through to Zachary. I'll send help as fast as they can come but don't look for them for four or five hours. Better let Cal have the money now. He's got a place that's safe in case they burn the cabin."

Langly was outside, crossing the porch, and then they could hear him unhitching his horse. There was a creaking of saddle leather, followed by the soft padding of hoofs on the canyon grass.

Ware passed over his layer of bills to Peterson who rose from his seat. Joyce followed her father with her eyes. She watched until a bedroom door closed on them.

From the soundboard of the rims came the spang of a rifle. Ware saw the girl pause, a brown Johnny cake half way to her mouth. Slowly the cake came back to the table. They waited in silence for other shots but there were none.

"I believe I understand," Ware said softly. "Lawyer Langly was your uncle."

Pale of face, she nodded. "My mother was Joyce Langly. After she died Uncle became very close to us. He and father tried to do something with Gimp and Sol. We . . . we've all failed miserably. Gimp is a killer. . . ."

Old Peterson came back into the main room and it was obvious the sound of the rifle had reached him. Joyce rose and he paused and pressed his leathery lips to her cheek before he went on to the door. Ware was at his heels and Cal wheeled, a deep frown furrowing his face.

"Stay in here. This here's my fight—and Langly's."

Ware's head inclined toward the bedroom and Cal's features softened. "Maybe you haven't yet bought into trouble, son. I don't know. Stay in here so you can take care of Joyce. If they kill me you'll know you'll have a fight for it."

Peterson spun through the door and the shadows closed around him. Ware was still moving after him when the firmness of Joyce's fingers stopped him. He paused for a moment, hand still laced over his gun butt.

"Not now, Ware," Joyce whispered. "Dad's all right. He's hawk-eyed and he knows every inch of the rimwalls. They'll not find him. But I'm frightened. Stay with me a moment."

His fingers eased on the bone handle and he let her lead him back into the dim interior. From the corner of his eye he noticed that already she had outened the lamps. The fingers had slipped away from his arm and she sank now to a bench built against the adobe. In the silence of the room he could hear her breath coming to him louder even than his own breathing.

He stood close by her; so close he could smell the freshness and the starch of her newly washed calico. He knew as he stood above her that old Peterson had sold more than a cabin, and more than cattle in a canyon. Yet he dared not reach out to touch her. He realized that what Joyce meant to him was far more than this, the mere glitter on the surface. All the longing he had had was asleep deep inside his breast and he shrank away, afraid of himself.

"The other day, when we met, it was meant to be that way," her voice came to him, scarcely louder than her breath.

"What is meant to be, will be."

"You know who the leader of the stage bandits was?"

"He was masked, that's all I know. That, and the fact he shot the driver while I closed in. I'd have killed him if my pony hadn't taken a ball right then."

"They shot Frosty Bennet because he cussed them from his seat," she said. "Frosty recognized them, too. That's why they killed him. Ware, that masked man who shot at you was Gimp. They didn't know I was coming home on the stage. I thought I'd get back a day ahead of time and surprise them. They thought

the coach carried a Fargo strongbox but it didn't."

"Gimp won't try that sort of thing much longer. Your troubles are almost over and when they are, all this will look like a kind of nightmare."

The girl was ignoring the trend of his thoughts as she went on: "It seemed as though you must surely be dead under that horse. And then you climbed to your knees and shot a few more times and Gimp's rustlers drove their horses into the brush . . ."

HE was conscious of her words coming to him from the darkness of her corner and he tried to use them as cover for his movements while he inched toward the door. A board creaked and they both caught the sound. She was on her feet running toward him in the next instant. Ware felt the solidness of her as she brushed his shoulder.

"I know you're going out, Ware. I'd want you to. What you said back there before dinner was the tiredness talking. It shows in your eyes. You and I, we both need a little peace. But we've got to earn it first, Ware."

He said quietly, "Joyce, I'm going out to shoot for Gimp."

"Father's out there, too. They'll try to kill him. It's one man against a dozen," she told him bravely. Then her voice wavered. ". . . and Uncle James."

Chin on shirt, he moved again for the door. Her voice halted him the second time. It drove through his brain and stirred his blood with a fire. "Before you go, hold me, Ware."

The softness of her came up against him and he held her tightly. In the darkness he lowered his head and found her lips ready. Then he broke away, pulling his father's bone-handled Colt as his boots touched the porch.

"Don't worry about the cabin, Ware!" she called to him. "I have a loaded Winchester and Father was always proud of the way I could use it."

The feel of her lips was still moist on his mouth. He shook his head to clear his brain as he moved through the dry grass.

He was uncertain of the positions the rustlers had selected. All he knew was that behind him Joyce was holding the cabin and before him somewhere old man Peterson was fighting the fight of his life.

Eighty yards deeper inside the canyon loomed a massive drop-rock, too large to be removed. His reasoning warned him that if Gimp meant to block their escape southward through this passage he would station a man behind this point. Guardedly Ware worked his way forward, expecting each moment to feel the sting of a bullet.

There was a sound from behind the barricade; something like the scrape of iron across the rock. "*Quin es?* Who is it? *Quin es?*"

Ware hurtled himself forward, coming up hard against the under bulge of the rock just as the rustler fired. Ware felt the wind fan his temples. He lay still, holding his breath and wondering if the rustler would be able to pick out the sounds of his heart beats. Only the sighing of the breeze stirring the grass through the canyon. Then a definite movement from behind the rock. The killer had decided his bullet had penetrated flesh and would be coming forward to investigate.

WARE'S mind reached an instant decision. His best strategy lay in deft, silent action. Let others, too, think this rustler had completed his mission.

Ware rose cautiously to his knee, and just as the rustler showed his sombrero Ware leaped.

He struck hard, twisting the rifle from the man's grasp. His hand was instantly about the rustler's throat, bending him backward. And then he felt the sharp pricking in his back. A knife driving between his shoulder blades. Twice he felt the sting of it. The blood was already wetting his shirt. Desperation drove his arm upward and he brought his fist clubbing down like a hammer, striking with

every muscle in his body. A blinding pain wretched his stomach.

The rustler crumpled like straw under the impact of the head blow. Ware grasped him by the collar and dragged him behind the shelter of the drop-rock. He knelt and reached with an unsteady hand. There was no pulse. His blow had broken the killer's neck.

Wonderment worked up over his face and he drew to the edge of the rock and peered around it, searching for sign of fresh enemies. Movement on the crest of the rim arrested his attention. His Colt lifted and he found a target for his sights. A long shot for a revolver. Even before his hand closed over the dead man's rifle, recognition dawned to him. Old Cal Peterson was working this same stealthy game. From up there Cal held a commanding position over his oval valley. Yet Ware wished the cowman would work back away from the edge. Limned that way against the gray sky Peterson made an easy target.

While this thought was still fresh in Ware's mind a lance of flame reached out from behind a manzanita clump, and he saw Cal totter on the brink. He saw Cal clutch for his heart and in the same movement work away from the lip of the gorge. Death struck while Ware watched and Peterson slumped and came crashing into the valley with a thud that froze the blood in Ware's veins.

Joyce, too, must have witnessed that shot. Now a blistering rattle of rifle fire came from the cabin. The entire canyon seemed to come to life in a racketing reverberation of shots and the rustlers were pouring their lead into the mud walls from the north.

Ware's boots beat down the grass as he ran, half stooped, toward the manzanita clump. Low at his hip, the bone grip-plates of his Colt were palmed in his fist. He felt the weapon buck once, twice, as he ran. Through his mind were running the words of old Cal Peterson, *A man's got to fight to live* . . . over and over again.

A dark, gaunted figure leaped out from the bush to meet him, rifle at ready. The thought hammered through Ware's head as he bore down, this was the outlaw who had held up the stage. Even stripped of the mask, recognition came readily. Ware saw the rifle belch flame, and a sharp pain, like that of a whip-lash, passed over his cheek. Again the Colt at his hip bucked and Gimp grew weak about the knees and slipped loosely forward across the grass.

Behind Ware the cabin seemed strangely quiet. He wheeled away from the lifeless body and raced toward the structure. Against the yellow log wall he made out a figure; pinned tight, like a shadow. As he covered ground he was aware of a pistol exploding at the shadow's hip. But the fire was running in the direction of the forted outlaws. He heard a man's voice, thin and weak.

"It's me, Ligon. Over here in that rock . . . three of them. I can't route them . . . out."

Lawyer Langly!

Ware's heart thumped fast as he raced by the sagging figure and rounded the corner of the cabin. He sent one shot into the rocks and then withdrew to reload. Behind him he heard a dull cursing.

"Sol!" Langly called. "Don't worry, Ligon, I'll take care of him!"

Ware slipped around the corner of the porch and threw home more lead into the stronghold of the rustlers. He understood now why there had been this racketing of guns from this end of the canyon. Langly had crawled back somehow and had started a war of his own.

His shooting was good for night work. Two figures rose above the rock and attempted to work back down the canyon. The third, he realized, would never move again. Together with Langly they were steadily whittling the rustlers down.

He shot again at the retreating forms and missed. Behind him he heard a single shot and hoped that Langly had done better with Sol. The last shot in Ware's pistol spun one of the fleeing figures around and he saw the man pitch down on the rocks on his face. The other man ran, calling to companions further down the canyon.

Ware walked back, punching empties in haste. On the porch he faced a sprawled form, the exact replica of Gimp. Ten feet beyond lay the lawyer, half on the porch and half sprawled across the grass.

Ware ran forward, realizing how his body ached and throbbed as he ran. It felt as though someone had reopened the wounds of his back as he stooped.

Langly lay lifeless on the porch, his body distorted and broken by lead. Suddenly Ware felt a sickness come over him. He felt his head go light.

There were hurried footsteps behind him. He tried to turn and couldn't make it. And then a soft warmness was closing over his hand and he felt the brushing of something across his face. The air infiltrating his nostrils was perfumed. He tried to fight for his strength. Joyce had her head cradled on his chest and her arms were about him.

The ring of his voice surprised him. "It's over, honey. They'll never come back."

"Ware—Ware, they shot Dad. I saw him fall from the rim. I tried to kill Gimp!"

He broke her grasp about his shoulders and drew her head down tighter against his chest. He waited while the sobs ran themselves out. Through his head, words were running; he might have said them aloud: "Old Cal Peterson died so you and I could find our place in the sun . . ."

Already he could feel new strength coming to his shattered body. Tomorrow would bring another day. There would be other tomorrows and through them he could see their herds growing all the time.

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THE RANGERS AND SAMUEL COLT

By GORDON DOZIER

THE Texas Rangers, after their small beginnings in 1826 under Stephen F. Austin, colonizer of Texas, came into their own as a legally organized outfit during the Texas revolution of 1935-36 in which the Lone Star Republic broke away from Mexico to become briefly an independent state. The Rangers, as everyone knows, were mighty men, and from then on fulfilled brilliantly their function as a highly mobile force to combat marauders of every type. But, with all their native talents, the Rangers would quite possibly have early been wiped out by their most formidable foes, the Indians, if a Connecticut Yankee named Samuel Colt had not come up with an invention sorely needed in Indian warfare.

The first Texas pioneers brought with them types of firearms effective enough for the slower and firmer requirements of the hilled and wooded East; single-shot pistols and rifles, highly inappropriate for running battle against mounted Indians. For while a white on horseback could tote ready loaded two pistols and a rifle, giving him a total of three quick shots, an Indian adversary could carry dozens of arrows which he could fire with great rapidity, without the pauses between shots necessary for the paleface. It would take the paleface a full minute to reload a weapon after discharge, in which time the Indian could have sent twenty arrows winging, without a pause in the motion of his swift mustang.

Naturally this gave the Indians a tremendous advantage in battle. The main Indian tactic was to draw the fire of their enemies and then rush in before they could reload. The white man, therefore, had to fire slowly and in rotation in order to conserve ammunition and to make certain that there would always be in their group at least one gun ready to fire. Every shot of the Rangers had necessarily to count—which was one principal reason for the Texans' outstanding marksmanship. Whatever advantage the Texans' greater firepower, accuracy and range gave them was well-nigh nullified by the Indians' speed and volume of fire.

In 1835, Samuel Colt, at the age of 21, took out his first patent in England for a revolving pistol, the first wooden model of which he had whittled during a voyage in 1830 from Boston to Calcutta. In 1836, he took out a patent in America, and by 1838 a company was organized at Paterson, New Jersey, for the manufacture of this radically new firearm. The company had taken over his patents and had agreed to turn out the guns, giving him royalties, while he was to arrange for their purchase by the United States Government. But with characteristic shortsightedness, the Army and Navy refused to see the possibilities of the weapon and in 1842 the Paterson factory went into bankruptcy.

However, before this happened, a number of Colt's revolvers had found their way into Texas. One of the first models, a six-chambered, .34 caliber job, fell into the hands of Samuel H. Walker, captain of the Texas Rangers, who saw in it the answer to a long-felt need. In 1842, he came to New York to make a purchase of the latest types of firearms and sought out Colt. At a conference between the two men, Walker suggested a number of improvements. Colt incorporated them into a second model which, in honor of its improver, he named the Walker.

THE Rangers were then equipped with a good number of the new models and soon proved their great worth.

The first battle in which revolvers were used against mounted Indians was the battle of the Pedernales in May, 1844. John C. Hays, a Ranger captain, had gone out with fourteen men from San Antonio to search for a band of marauding Indians. They were returning without having located their quarry when they suddenly became aware that they were being followed by seventy Comanches. A hot battle ensued in which the Indians, taken completely by surprise with the new weapons carried by the Rangers, made off in confusion after thirty of their band had been killed in a matter of minutes. Hays gave full credit for the victory to the six-shooters.

A few days later, the six-gun was put to its second test in Indian warfare and again emerged triumphant. This time, another group of Rangers led by Hays, were attacked in a canyon by a greatly superior number of Comanches. The Rangers first discharged their rifles, then leapt to their saddles and charged. The Indians, expecting the Texans to remain on the defensive, were astonished at this move, and were completely bewildered as the Rangers swept upon them with a rapid-fire hail of hot lead such as they had never before experienced. They vainly sought to make a stand and then fled in wild disorder, dropping their shields, bows and arrows as they went. Half the warriors were killed.

In 1850, Major George Howard and Captain I. F. Sutton of the Rangers wrote a glowing testimonial to the revolvers. "We state," they said, "and with entire assurance of the fact, that your six-shooter is the arm which has rendered the name of Texas Rangers a check and terror to the bands of our frontier Indians."

But though the revolver had proved its worth on the plains of Texas, the demand for the new weapon had not been sufficient to keep Colt's company from bankruptcy; the number of Texas fighting men to be equipped was small, and, since the main frontier line of the country had not yet moved far west of the Mississippi and was still in wooded areas, there were still not many other frontiersmen operating in an environment which would make the rapid fire gun a necessity and a desirable article of purchase.

Then in the war with Mexico that followed the admission of Texas as a state in the Union, in 1845, the Texas Rangers, serving with the American army, gained world-wide renown. The Rangers began to demand more revolvers, and finally General Zachary Taylor responded by requisitioning the government for a thousand Colts.

But none had been manufactured for five years and the inventor was bankrupt. Though the Government, which had several times rejected Colt's invention, now offered him $28,000 for a thousand revolvers, he had no machinery nor any money with which to start up a factory again. In fact, he did not even have one of his six-shooters to use as a model. He advertised for one with no results. But he set to work and designed a new and improved type, and then arranged with Whitney, the manufacturer of cotton gins and firearms, to make these revolvers at his Whitneyville, Connecticut, factory. Though Colt lost three thousand dollars on this contract, official recognition had at last come to him and within a few years he was a millionaire.

Soldiers returning to their homes from the Mexican War spread the fame of the Colt revolver far and wide. And it then became standard equipment of men throughout the West.

Jeff didn't like this dangerous situation which involved Sam Bentley's pretty daughter but the girl had a mind of her own—and there was more folly in Jeff being mule-stubborn about taking a hand in her plans to carry on a smuggling game that could lead to naught but a

Double-Cross Finish

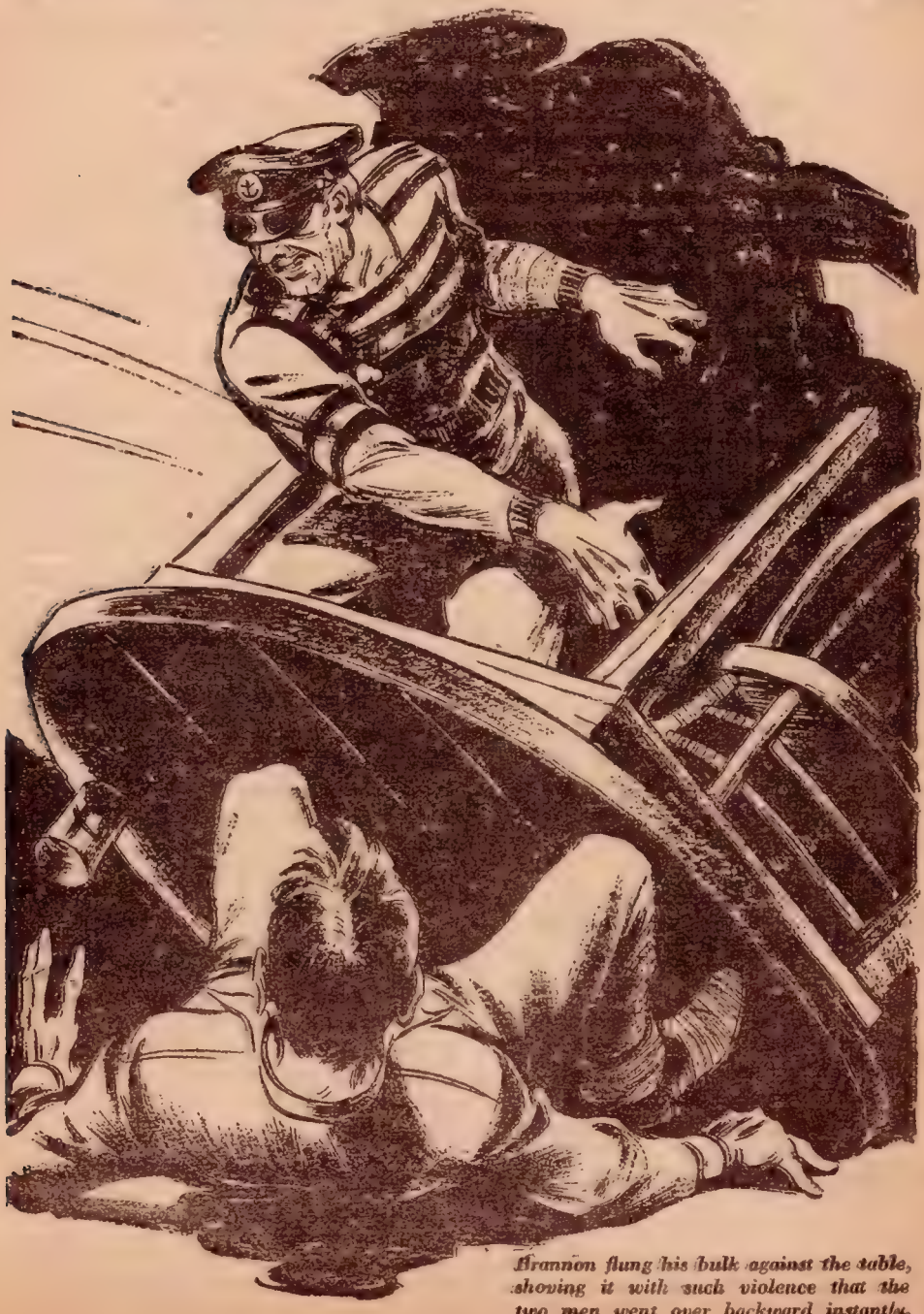
Illustrated by Frank Volp

JEFF RANDALL got off the stage at Carson City, a little tired after the long trip over the Sierras. Retrieving his one piece of luggage, a carpetbag, from the coach's rear boot, he became aware of a man watching him from the express company's office doorway. The man wore a uniform marked with a sergeant's stripes and was without doubt a recruiter. Nevada, then, was still sending men as well as silver bullion East to bolster the Union cause.

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

The sergeant said, "One moment, friend," and came down from the doorway. He had a round red face and, like all his kind, a beguiling smile. He said with forced heartiness, "Friend, you look like a man who'd want to do something for his country!"

Jeff's face had a stiff, drawn look that did not relax. "I've done that something," he said. "If you doubt my word, I'll let



Brannon flung his bulk against the table, shoving it with such violence that the two men went over backward instantly.

you see my wound. It starts here. . . . " He gingerly touched his side. "And then ends up under my shoulder blade. I got it at Shiloh, Sergeant, and it's not yet altogether healed."

The sergeant's smile faded. "Your discharge papers will be enough."

"I lost them. A week ago in Frisco."

"Careless, that."

"Even a careful man is apt to lose all he owns on the Barbary Coast."

"So you were robbed." The recruiter sneered.

"That's it," Jeff retorted. "I was robbed."

He turned away, crossing the street between two big mule-drawn freight rigs bound for Virginia City with supplies. He knew the sergeant was looking after him with suddenly soured gaze, and he felt uneasy. He didn't want that recruiter to become too curious about him, for his discharge papers hadn't been stolen. They were carefully banked with a bartender in Memphis.

A Confederate veteran had to fabricate untruths about himself if he wanted to avoid arrest and maybe imprisonment in a non-secessionist State. Jeff Randall had been robbed, all right, if not of his discharge papers. That was why he had worked his way back to Nevada. Because while away fighting and bleeding, he had been robbed of all he owned. The war was over for him, thanks to the wound that was so slow in healing, but he still had a private fight on his hands.

He forgot the recruit-sergeant and thought bitterly, *Maybe I won't recover a red cent but somehow I'll get revenge.* Down Carson Street he halted before a wagonyard that once had borne a sign reading: Randall & Brannon, Freighters. His face took on an ugly look.

The sign bore another name now, as did the several big wagons standing about the yard. The place no longer belonged to Jeff Randall and Matt Brannon. *Big, honest Matt Brannon.* He'd had a habit of so calling himself. He had an open face, a disarming grin. He had been an honest enough partner, so long as Jeff was here to keep an eye on him.

But then war had broken out between the States, and Jeff, by birth a Virginian, went home to don the Gray. It had been all right with Matt Brannon. He had promised to keep the business running until Jeff came back. He hadn't kept his promise a year. Brannon had sold out—Jeff's share as well as his own. And he'd pocketed the whole of the sale money. It had been a betrayal.

JEFF had heard about it by letter from a friend, but he was in the Army then and unable to do anything but wait. Now his waiting was over. *I've got to find him,* Jeff told himself. But he knew that Matt Brannon, ridden by guilt, wouldn't be easy to find.

"Jeff! By all, Jeff Randall!"

The voice turned Jeff about. There was his friend, little Sam Bentley, standing in the doorway of his hardware store across the street. Jeff showed a smile, his first in a long, long time. He crossed the street. They shook hands vigorously. Sam Bentley was a pale shade of a man of fifty-five. His left leg was in a brace and his left arm was paralyzed. He had been in a mine explosion at Virginia City six years ago, and now he could do no harder work than clerking in his store. But he was a successful small merchant.

"How're things, Sam? How's business?" Jeff asked the moment their hands touched. He looked over the smaller man's head, peering into the store. He was thinking of Jan Bentley, Sam's daughter. "How is Jan?"

Sam told him that business was bad because he could not get regular shipments of merchandise from the East on account of the war. "But Jan is fine," he added, giving Jeff a knowing wink. "She'll be better than ever when she knows you're home."

"She was peeved when I went away."

"Oh, that! Women never understand things like that."

"Where is she, Sam?"

"She's at Virginia City, visiting her married sister. But she'll be back on this afternoon's stage," Bentley said. "Come

inside, boy. We may as well sit down while we talk."

They went inside to the little office at the rear of the poorly stocked store. Bentley had a clerk, a lanky young man with sandy hair and watery blue eyes blinking behind silver-rimmed glasses, and he would look out for any customers. Bentley carefully closed the office door and turned the key in the lock.

"So we won't be bothered," he explained.

But his caution, which seemed reasonless, surprised Jeff Randall. They each had a drink poured from a bottle Sam Bentley kept in his desk. The merchant set out a box of cigars but Jeff filled his pipe. They smoked and talked, mostly of the war and of Jeff's experience. They grew gloomy over such talk for both men knew that the Confederacy was having hard going. Like Jeff, Sam Bentley was a Virginian.

"Nevada swung over to the Union and was given statehood," Bentley told Jeff. "But there's some of us who're still secesh."

"You'll get into trouble if this town finds out you're a Johnny Reb," Jeff said with a wry grin. "But I guess you know when not to talk."

"I only talk to friends, Jeff."

"Are there more Secesh here in Carson?"

"A few. A good many in Virginia City," Bentley said. He lowered his voice. "There are some Confederate agents about, too."

"Out here?" Jeff said, surprised again. "What for?"

"To keep tabs on things," Bentley told him. "The government at Richmond wants to know how many recruits are leaving Nevada and California. And how much gold and silver is being shipped East. Our agents manage to strike a small blow now and then." He peered at Jeff searchingly. "You got my letter about Matt Brannon?"

Jeff nodded, his face taking on its stiff look again.

"What are you going to do about him?" Sam asked.

"I'll have to find him first, Sam."

"You got any plans beyond taking care of that no-good?"

"So far, no," Jeff said glumly. He hadn't anything much to build plans upon; because of his wound, he could not undertake hard work. And all his money had been tied up in the freighting firm, so he couldn't start up in another business.

He prodded his carpetbag with the toe of his boot. "I've a gun in there," he went on. "It'll do to take care of Matt Brannon. If he's got any money when I locate him, I'll see that he settles for all or part of what he stole from me. Beyond that I'm not planning."

Bentley said, "You'll have trouble finding him. He's not in Nevada, Jeff."

"You know where he is?" Jeff asked and got a nod in reply. "Well?"

"I'd advise against your seeking revenge," the little merchant said slowly. "But I know you don't want advice. Young men are proud and they play up to their pride by keeping their ledgers balanced—"

"I like to pay my debts," Jeff broke in. "Where is he, Sam?"

Bentley again lowered his voice and his tone was wary. "I'll make a deal with you," he said. "I'll tell you where Matt Brannon can be found if you'll do something for me. No, not for me—for the Cause." He smiled thinly at Jeff's frown. "I know you've done your part as a soldier. But a civilian can help, too. It's like this, Jeff. . . . I'm acting as a Confederate secret agent."

"You, Sam!"

"Hard to believe, eh—a crippled hardware merchant being a secret agent? But I've been at it a year and I've managed to trick the Yankees more than once. I've gotten away with it so far but lately I've had reason to believe that I'm under suspicion. That's why I need help."

"You realize that spies are put before a firing squad or hanged?" Jeff asked. He was shaken. "These are war times, Sam. You're taking dangerous risks."

"I realize all that. Is it a deal?"

"Maybe. What do you want me to do?"

"There's some freighting to be done," Bentley replied. "Smuggling, rather. Mercury smuggling, Jeff. The Confederate arsenals need it badly. The only mercury mines in the country are in California. Their output is divided between the gold and silver reduction mills here in the West and the Union arsenals in the East. But we've gotten hold of some—a thousand flasks. And we've got to smuggle it out of California!"

CHAPTER II

Smuggling Game

JEFF WAS SURPRISED only that a mild-mannered man like Sam Bentley should be involved in such a risky venture. He knew that mercury—or quicksilver, as it was more commonly called—was of great importance in wartime. Both the North and the South needed it in vast quantities. It was used as a fulminate, a detonator for more powerful explosives. As a base for fuses. The Confederacy, desperately short of the sinews of war, would certainly need what mercury could be smuggled out. And smuggling required bold and able men.

"What are our chances of moving the stuff?" Jeff asked.

Bentley smiled, knowing that he had won his gaunt-faced friend over into his game. "With a man like you lending a hand, our chances are good," he said. "We'll move out fifty flasks on your first trip. We won't risk too much on any one trip."

"But there is some risk?"

"To be truthful, Jeff, we did lose a shipment of fifty flasks three weeks ago. There are patrols along the coast."

"So the stuff is gotten out by boats," Jeff said. He mapped California in his mind. He knew that mercury was obtained from cinnabar ore and that it was mined within a short distance of San Francisco. Evidently his job would be to haul the flasks to some lonely spot along the beach. "When do we jump into this thing?" he asked.

"You'll leave tonight if it's a deal."

"It's a deal. But you won't be coming along?"

"I won't be with you," Bentley said. "As I said a minute ago, I'm under suspicion. I'm pretty sure I'm being watched. But you won't go alone. You'll have good company. Jan will go with you."

Jeff was jolted. "Jan!"

"That's it," Sam Bentley said. "Jan is in this with me. By her own wishes. She will carry the money—money raised among loyal Southerners here in Nevada—and she'll pay the man from the mine. It's all arranged. Jan is to hand over the money when the flasks are delivered."

"I don't like her being mixed up in such a game, Sam."

"I didn't like it either, at first. But I've become hardened to the idea. Jan feels strongly about it. If she were a man, she'd be a soldier. She had to have a part in what's happening. The truth is, she went to Virginia City for more than to visit her sister. She is bringing the money back with her."

Jeff still didn't like it and said so again. But he remembered that Sam Bentley's pretty daughter had a mind of her own. He had discovered that just before leaving to enlist. Jan hadn't wanted him to go; then she had seen things differently and argued that his loyalties were to Nevada since he had settled there, and not to Virginia which he had left. It had flared into a quarrel, Jeff remembered, with Jan in a temper and calling him mule-stubborn. He couldn't understand the change in her.

"All right, Sam," he said. "It's still a deal, even though Jan is involved. Now carry out your part of the bargain. Where's Matt Brannon?"

"You'll find him when you pick up the mercury," Bentley replied. "He's in on the smuggling."

JAN had matured, grown up: that was the change in her. Jeff didn't meet the stage but waited at the store, in the cubby-hole office, to surprise her. It was Sam Bentley's idea. In some way the little hardware merchant was boyishly simple.

They came in, Bentley carrying a traveling bag that looked heavy. Jan was wearing fashionable clothes: dark green basque and hooped-out skirt, a small and jaunty hat, big-buckled shoes. She looked as though she had just stepped out of one of San Francisco's smart Parisian shops. She was a tall girl, a tawny blonde. Her eyes were gray and wide and she had a warming smile. Jan smiled at the lanky clerk, who stared at her over his glasses.

"How are you, Herb?"

"Fine, Miss Jan. It's good to see you back."

Jan laughed. "But I was away only two days!"

Her laughter was music to Jeff Randall, watching through the partly opened office doorway. He noticed how Herb Mitchell —he had learned the clerk's name from Bentley—looked from the girl to the traveling bag Sam Bentley carried. Behind the thick lenses, Herb's eyes took on an odd glitter. He moistened his lips. His skinny face grew sharp, shrewd. Jeff noted all that with the briefest of glances, then he was aware of nothing but Jan Bentley. She reached the office door, pushed it wide. She halted, stared round-eyed. The reticule fell from her hands.

"Jeff!" she whispered. "Jeff, you're home!"

She surged toward him. He took her in his arms. It was a moment worth waiting for, but even as he held her close Jeff

Jeff flung himself against the door and this time it gave way.

felt despair. Their quarrel was forgotten but things still weren't right between them. Marriage was out of the question for a man without a livelihood. His happiness soured, Jeff silently cursed Matt Brannon.

The three of them had an early supper at the Ormsby House and Jeff hid his bitterness behind a masking smile. He didn't want to spoil a pleasant meal for Sam Bentley and Jan. They finally discussed the trip, which was to be started tonight. Bentley had already told Jan that Jeff was to help with the mercury-smuggling. She had been pleased and told him, "I'm glad. The last trip, Herb Mitchell went along and he's not cut out for such work."

"That little clerk tried smuggling?" Jeff asked.

"He was willing enough." Jan smiled. "But he developed bad nerves." She explained that Herb hadn't liked it when told that he wouldn't be needed this trip. And added, "I don't know why he wanted to go, after the other trip make him so jumpy."

Jeff grinned, said, "Jumpy or not, a man likes being with a pretty girl. Where do we meet the man who'll give us the mercury?"

"At a roadhouse a few miles out of San Francisco."

"He's to be trusted?"

"So long as he gets his price," the girl replied. "And it's a high one—sixty dollars a flask. But quicksilver is contraband, so far as we are concerned, and we've got to pay the price."

"You've got money enough for fifty flasks?"

"Yes, cash in hand," Jan said, smiling. "And I can get enough for the thousand flasks Don Miguel—he's the owner of the Barquino Mine—promised to sell us. Our friends in Virginia City are generous."

"There's one thing I don't understand," Jeff said. "How does Matt Brannon fit into it?"

Mention of that name made Jan's smile fade. "So that's why you joined us," she said huskily. "You want to find Matt Brannon."

"I can't let him get away with robbing me, Jan."

"It'll do you no good to accuse him of cheating you. The money he got from the sale of the freighting business didn't last him six months. He squandered it on gambling and honkatonk women, Jeff. . ." She put her hand on his arm. "Jeff, please don't be vengeful," she begged. "Matt and you were friends. You must have known how weak he is where money is concerned. It's something he can't help."

Jeff said, "I can't let him get away with it," and saw anger come into Jan's eyes. He felt a sudden jealousy, remembering that both he and Brannon had courted the girl and that for a time she had had trouble deciding between them. He was curt, saying, "Defend him if you like. But I'm going to settle with him—somehow."

AND Jan's voice was stiff, replying, "I'm not defending him. He did wrong. He betrayed a trust. But revenge won't be satisfaction. I'm thinking of what may happen between you. Matt's weakness is dishonesty but in other ways he's strong—tough. If you cross him, it'll end in gunplay. Besides, you'll endanger our plans by bucking Matt. It's my job to contact Don Miguel. Yours will be to move the quicksilver from the Barquino furnaces to the beach. Matt's job is to pick it up by boat. We've got to work together. If one of us causes trouble—"

"I'll wait until after the stuff is safe on its way."

"That's a promise, Jeff?"

He nodded and saw that Jan was satisfied. But somehow it wasn't the same, there at the table. Sam Bentley said, "Let's finish eating. You two must catch the stage and it leaves at eight-thirty." Jan's cheerfulness was ended and Jeff moodily wondered if the girl still had some feeling for Matt Brannon. A handsome sort, Brannon, with a way with women. It did seem as though Janice Bentley wanted to protect the sharper!

It was dark when they came from the

hotel. They walked together toward the hardware store. The Bentleys lived over the store and Jan said she would go upstairs and change her clothes for the trip. A rider came swinging away from Shane's livery stable and Bentley said, "Why, that's Herb Mitchell. What's he doing on a horse? I never knew him to ride anywhere." He lifted his voice: "Hi, Herb!"

The lanky clerk gave them a startled glance, then quirted his mount. He loped by without a nod, word or gesture. His spectacles glinted in the light from a nearby window and his pale face was set, beneath a broadbrimmed black hat. He had a holstered gun belted to his side and he galloped on, heading west out of town, and the darkness swallowed him.

Sam Bentley murmured, "I'll be darned. Jan, what do you make of that?"

"I don't know," she said. "Unless—" She broke off, shaking her head. "No; it can't be. A man like Herb Mitchell wouldn't be apt to make trouble for us. I don't understand it."

Jeff Randall didn't understand it either, for he still didn't know much about this mercury-smuggling game. But he remembered the look on Herb Mitchell's face when Jan and Sam Bentley arrived at the store with the bag containing the money. He recalled too that Bentley believed he was suspected of being a Confederate agent. Jeff wouldn't be too surprised if the inadequate-looking clerk turned out to be a counter-agent. A Union agent. That might explain why the first shipment of contraband mercury had fallen into the hands of the coast patrols.

It looked to Jeff Randall as though the war still wasn't over for himself!

CHAPTER III

Bedlam Breaks Out

IT WAS A long and tiresome trip by stage from Carson City through the Sierras and down to Folsom on the American River. The stagecoach raced along at five miles an hour, hour after hour, with brief stops for fresh horses each twenty-five miles of the way. The night dragged and the new sun found them still on the trail. Jeff and the girl were mistaken by the other passengers for a young married couple on a holiday trip. Neither Jeff nor Jan Bentley disillusioned them. But Jan's manner was still chill. She was still put out with Jeff for wanting to settle matters with Matt Brannon.

The traveling bag, along with Jeff's carpetbag, was stowed away in the Concord's rear boot. Jan wanted it so; she felt that to take it inside the coach would make the other passengers wonder. She didn't want anyone to suspect the bag contained something of great value.

At Folsom, after a five-hour wait, which Jan spent resting in a hotel room, they crossed to the railroad station which was on the opposite side of the river. Jeff carried the bags aboard, found a seat and got Jan settled. He went back to the station platform to smoke a pipe, for there was to be a quarter-hour wait before the train pulled out.

The station was busy. There were many passengers bound for San Francisco. They swarmed into the coaches and Jeff finally decided to get aboard or Jan wouldn't be able to hold his seat. He knocked out his pipe, turned, collided with a man.

Jeff said, "Sorry."

The man said hastily, "My fault," then gave Jeff a full look. The man gave a start, grunted, then swung away. Jeff stared after him, for it was the clerk from Sam Bentley's store—Herb Mitchell.

Jeff frowned, took a step after him, but Mitchell darted like a man in flight into the station.

Going aboard the train, Jeff was puzzled. The man had seemed afraid of him. He mentioned the encounter to Jan and she worried about it. "I don't understand it," she said slowly.

"He's up to something," Jeff told her. "And I'd gamble it has to do with your mercury smuggling."

"But Herb's so—so inoffensive!"

"Maybe. How long have you known him?"

"He started to clerk in the store nearly a year ago."

"But you don't know much about him?"

Jan shook her head and Jeff decided to go find the man and have a talk with him. But as he rose, the train got underway. It started with such a lurch that Jeff was thrown back onto the seat. The Sacramento Valley Railroad, now eight years old, hauled passengers at their own risk. . . .

Train travel was faster, twenty miles an hour, but there was still discomfort. The coach in which Jeff and his companion rode was crowded with passengers and even when darkness came it was stifling hot. Jan looked cool and fresh but Jeff wiped sweat from his face. On the stage there had been choking dust but now they had to contend with smoke and cinders. Jeff would have gone through the other coaches to look for Herb Mitchell but he didn't want to leave Jan alone. Most of the other passengers were rowdies from the mining camps and many of them were drinking.

Jan finally leaned her head against Jeff's shoulder. He thought she had dozed off but after a time she whispered, "We could be married in San Francisco, Jeff . . . if you still want me."

He wanted her, all right, but he said curtly, "How could I support a wife?"

"You'll get a job or a fresh start in business."

"That'll be first," he told her, "then we'll talk about getting married. I'm just hoping Matt Brannon has some money on him when I find him."

"Jeff, please—"

"Don't ask it. I won't let up on him."

"It's little enough to do for the girl you're to marry."

"It's too much for you to ask," Jeff retorted, then gave a startled grunt. "What's that?"

The train had come to a jolting stop. Everyone in that coach was thrown about and a couple of men on their feet in the aisle fell sprawling. Outside, harsh voices lifted, then gunshots rang out.

Jeff grabbed for his carpetbag to get out his gun, as a man somewhere shouted, "It's a hold-up!"

MEN cursed, looked wildly about for places to hide money and pokes. A woman screamed, pointed toward the rear doorway. A masked man with a shotgun stepped in from the platform. At the same moment another, this one with a levelled six-shooter, appeared at the front of the coach.

Jan grabbed Jeff's arm, whispered hoarsely, "Don't try it, Jeff!" She kept him from getting his carpetbag open.

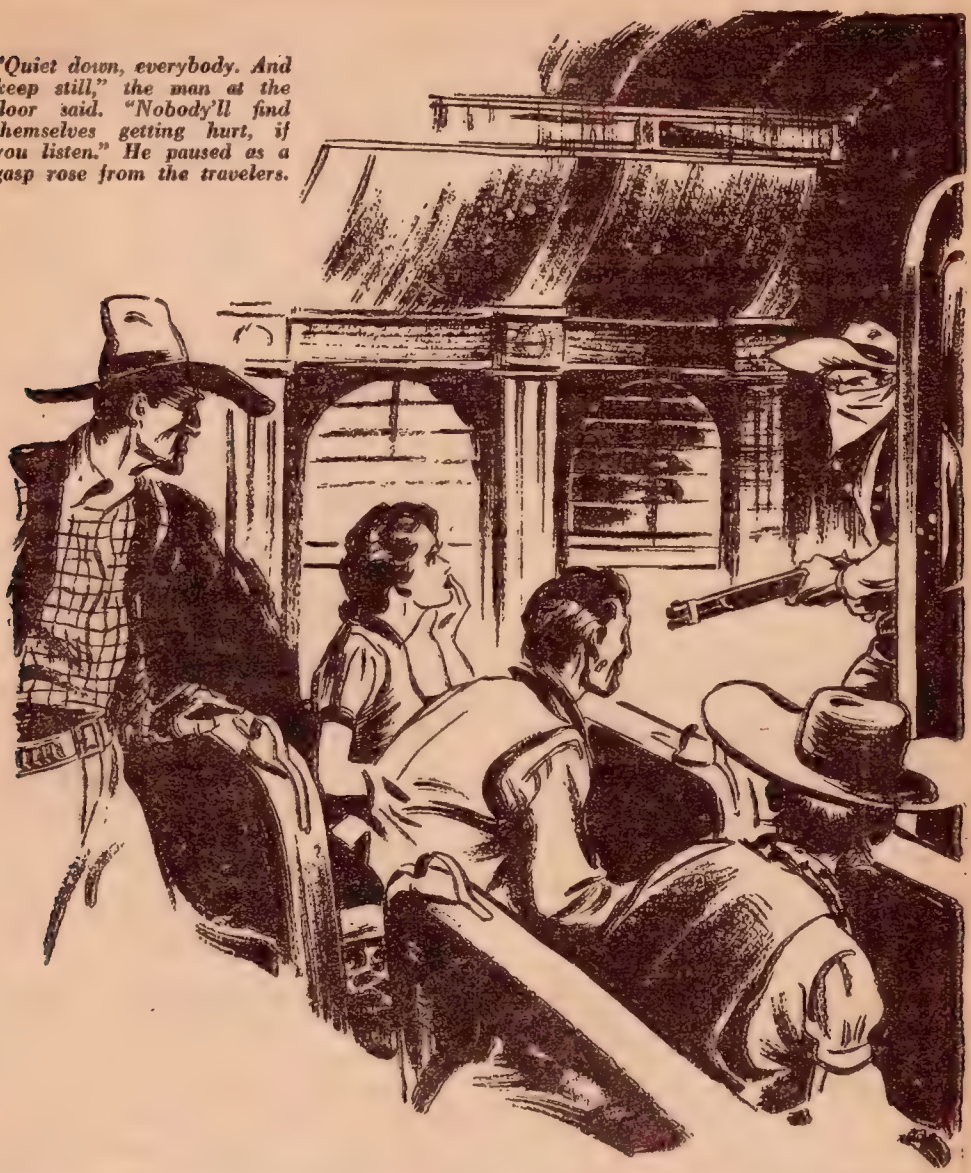
"Quiet down, everybody. And keep still." The man at the rear was talking. "Nobody'll be hurt."

A miner wailed, "No; but we'll be robbed!"

Other voices rose in protest but they were silenced by a shot fired into the coach ceiling by the outlaw with the six-gun. It was a tomb-like silence. It lasted until a third masked man appeared. He was taller than any man in the crowded coach—a husky six-foot-six, Jeff Randall judged. He wore a pearl-gray hat, a long black coat and a patterned vest. A thick gold watch chain with square links dropped from one vest pocket to the other. Instead of a gun, he carried an empty flour sack.

He bowed mockingly. His blue eyes were humorous above the neckscarf mask. "Allow me to introduce myself, friends," he said. "Nichols is the name—Captain Jack Nichols." He paused as a gasp rose from some of the passengers, then chuckled. "Heard of me, eh? Good. Now you know there's no reason to be scared. Captain Jack Nichols and his boys are no ordinary bandits. We're Confederate soldiers, friends—guerrillas. Some of my boys are looting the express car for war loot. While they're busy I figured I'd ask for contributions for the Cause. I'll pass among you, friendly-like, and all donations will be welcome."

The donations were reluctantly dropped into the flour sack as the self-styled guerrilla leader worked his way along the aisle. Most of the passengers were Union-sympathizers; those who were not concealed the fact for their own well-being. Nichols finally arrived at the seat



"Quiet down, everybody. And keep still," the man at the door said. "Nobody'll find themselves getting hurt, if you listen." He paused as a gasp rose from the travelers.

Jeff and Jan Bentley occupied. Jeff gave him a scowl and ignored the gaping sack.

"Nothing for the boys in Gray?" the bandit demanded. He saw Jan try to cover her traveling bag with her voluminous skirt. His eyes lost their humorous glint. "What's in that, ma'am?"

"Nothing."

"Maybe I'd better make sure."

Jeff was measuring the man. He saw a holstered gun beneath the dudish black coat and wondered if he could grab it before the bandit managed to drop the sack. He was sure that the other two bandits would not open fire with their leader in the range. Then it wasn't necessary to take the risk. Jan Bentley whispered something, one word, a Spanish word it seemed to Jeff, and Nichols took his gaze off the traveling bag.

"Only your clothes, ma'am?" the bandit said. "Well, Captain Jack Nichols never doubts a lady's word."

He gave both Jan and Jeff a lingering look, then went on back through the coach. A minute or two later he dis-

appeared. His two men remained with ready guns until a shrill whistle sounded outside; then they too departed. Bedlam then broke outamong the passengers. Guns were jerked from pockets, pulled from luggage. A dozen men began shooting wildly from the windows. Jeff took his Navy Colt out but Jan again caught hold of his arm.

"Don't, Jeff. They didn't harm us."

"They're nothing but bandits!"

Jan nodded. "Maybe they are but lots of people believe Jack Nichols is what he claims—a Confederate guerilla."

"You believe it," Jeff said sourly. "What did you say to him to keep him from opening your pag?"

Nobody was listening but Jan lowered her voice to a whisper. "I told him the Spanish word for quicksilver—*azogue*—hoping he would understand its meaning. I was counting on his being a Confederate sympathizer and on his knowing that quicksilver was being smuggled to the South. He did understand, Jeff. He understood that we have money in the bag to pay for contraband quicksilver."

Jeff gazed at her in admiration. There'd never been a girl like Janice Bentley!

CHAPTER IV

Finishing Blow

IN SAN FRANCISCO they took hotel rooms. The town was shrouded with fog and further travel at night would have been difficult if not dangerous.

While Jan fixed up, Jeff went to a barber shop for a bath and a shave. He had his clothes brushed and his boots polished. Then they had supper and went to the opera house. They took the traveling bag with them, Jeff carrying it, so that they knew it was safe. Money that had so much importance was a burden. . . . Later, back at the hotel, Jeff saw Jan and the bag locked in her room, then went to his own.

As soon as he lighted the lamp, he saw that his carpetbag had been opened and searched.

Nothing had been taken. There was nothing in the carpetbag to tempt a thief. Jeff had his gun thrust into the waist band of his jeans, and the bag held only a change of clothing, a razor and a pouch of tobacco. But Jeff wasn't sure the intruder had been a hotel thief. He thought, *Herb Mitchell!* It was only a suspicion but he would have gambled his guess was right. He was sure that Mitchell had taken the train at Folsom and followed them to Frisco.

Jeff stepped out into the hall, went to Jan's door and knocked. When she answered without opening, he said guardedly, "Keep your door locked. Don't open it for anybody. There was a prowler in my room."

Jan turned the key, opened the door. "A thief, Jeff?"

"I'd bet it was Herb Mitchell."

"You think he was after the money?"

"Either that or he was hunting something he could use against me—my discharge papers. If it was the money, he's apt to come back and try to get into your room."

Jan nodded uneasily. "I'll keep my door locked and prop a chair against it," she added.

"If you're frightened, scream," Jeff told her. "I'll hear you."

She nodded again and closed the door.

Jeff went back to his room, sprawled on the bed with his clothes on, and slept lightly. But the night passed without Jan being bothered.

The next afternoon they took the stage that traveled to Santa Cruz and Monterey, arriving at sundown in a drowsy little village peopled by the descendants of the old *Californios*. Since Jan had made the trip before, she knew a boy who would transport them to their destination. The boy had an ancient carriage and two crowbait horses and the road led east, inland from the coast, through brush thickets and dense forest. It was a two-hour drive to the roadhouse—La Posada, Jan said it was called. The building was an old adobe, low and rambling. Half a dozen saddle horses and several mule-drawn carts stood about it. La Posada was a gathering-place for farm-

ers and ranchers as well as for miners from the Barquino Mine.

Jeff paid off the carriage, followed Jan into the roadhouse with the bags. The *tabernero,* a swarthy fat man, met them and bowed to the girl.

"Welcome, senorita," he said. "You come again for business with Don Miguel?"

"Yes. Mr. Randall and I will take rooms if Don Miguel hasn't arrived."

"Rooms and supper," the *tabernero* told her. *"Si!"*

Off to the right of this entrance hall, with its broad stairway, was a doorway to the barroom. Voices and guitar music came from there and the air was laced with the mingled smells of tobacco smoke and wine.

Jan followed the fat man upstairs; Jeff followed her.

La Posada was a tough, rowdy place. Jeff didn't like the idea of Jan visiting it. He left the traveling bag in the room the *tabernero* gave her. Jan said that she would rest until Don Miguel arrived, then have supper after finishing her part of the business. Jeff went to another room with the fat man and, being hungry, said, "I'll come downstairs for supper."

He left his carpetbag in the room, followed the *tabernero* down to the barroom. Perhaps thirty men and a half a dozen painted women were there, but the first man Jeff really noticed was Matt Brannon.

BRANNON sat at a table with two other men and a girl. He had the girl on his knee, his right arm about her waist. A bottle and glasses stood on the table. Brannon was laughing with the girl. He had a way of throwing his rusty-red head back when amused, letting the laughter roll out of his huge chest. He had a ruddy, handsome face. His blue eyes had a reckless glint. A ship officer's cap was perched on the back of his head and instead of a shirt he wore a seaman's jacket. His two male companions were also dressed as seamen. One was an American, the other a sour-looking Mexican. Brannon looked across the room, saw Jeff, and his laughing mood faded. Shock showed on his heavy face.

Jeff crossed the room, winding his way about the tables. By now the girl and Brannon's two companions knew that something was wrong. They solemnly eyed Jeff. He halted by the one empty chair, and was across the table from Brannon.

"Remember me, Matt?"

"Sure, Jeff," Brannon said hoarsely. "Sit down, have a drink."

"I want to talk with you alone, Matt."

"These are my friends, Jeff. You can talk in front of them."

"You want them to know what a tinhorn you are?" Jeff asked. He watched Brannon's face grow a brighter red. "How much money did the sale of the business bring, Matt?"

Brannon frowned, said guardedly, "Six thousand. And you'll get your share of it. Maybe not now, but soon. I used the six thousand to take a flyer in mining stock. It looked good but it turned out bad. I lost every cent. But I'll make your share good—in time."

"You're lying. You threw the money away at cards and on women."

Brannon's temper flared. "I don't like such talk! I won't take it from any man—not even from a friend."

Jeff said, "We're not friends now, Matt. Get on your feet and turn your pockets inside-out. If you've got any money, I'm taking it on account. Stand up, you hear!"

Brannon shoved the girl off his knee, stood up. There was a knife in a sheath at his belt but he wore no gun. He saw the butt of the Colt protruding from Jeff's waistband and cautiously kept his hands away from the knife. He took a leather pouch from his pocket, tossed it onto the table. There was a clatter of gold and coins.

"A couple hundred dollars there," he muttered, "Take it and be damned." His face was livid.

Jeff reached for the poke. That instant Brannon flung his bulk against the table, shoving it with such violence that the two seated men went over backward in

their chairs. The table came hurtling at Jeff but he backed away. He grabbed up the empty chair, swung it high, flung it at Brannon's face.

Brannon ducked low and the chair flew over him and crashed against the wall. The girl screamed. All around the room shouts and curses, mostly in Spanish, lifted as the crowd became aware of what was happening.

Brannon grabbed the table again, whipped it away from between him and Jeff—and came lunging forward, wild with rage.

Jeff hadn't braced himself. He went down as Brannon slammed into him. A boot bore into his ribs and he gasped with pain. But he caught hold of Brannon's leg, then heaved up from the floor. He threw the redhead over backward, dived after him.

They rolled and thrashed about, first one having the advantage and then the other. Their breathing rasped loud in the now silent barroom. The sound of blows was even louder. They used fists, boots, elbows and knees against each other. There was hatred in them, the hatred of friends who have fallen out, and each fought to maim or kill.

Brannon drove a knee into Jeff's groin, stretching him out limp and flat. He slammed down on Jeff, knees onto stomach, then closed his hands about Jeff's throat. It was a strangling hold and Jeff's vision blurred with a red-black mist. Panic caught hold of him for he knew that in seconds more Brannon would choke the life out of him. That panic gave him a new flow of strength and he heaved Brannon away. He kicked out and his boot-toe caught the man under the chin. Brannon's head rocked back and he went sprawling.

Jeff got up, stood swaying, bleeding from a cut over his left eye. He readied a finishing blow, launched it as Brannon picked himself up. It jarred Jeff from fist to boot-soles, but Brannon collapsed and stretched out on his face.

Jeff turned and bent for his hat, then saw the money pouch on the floor by the overturned table. He reached for the poke. Somebody shouted something in Spanish. A warning. Jeff looked around but he couldn't move fast enough to dodge the blow. One of the seamen who had been at Brannon's table—the American—had stepped up behind him with a wine bottle for a club. It hit Jeff at the base of the skull. There was an explosion in his brain. Like Matt Brannon, he pitched down onto his face—and was still.

CHAPTER V

Another Fool Play

THEY WORKED ON Jeff for a long time, and when he came to, choking on the brandy being poured into him, he groaned. His head felt as though his skull had been cracked open. He still lay on the floor, a circle of faces gaping down at him. Miners, *vaqueros*, farmers, percentage girls. All dusky Spanish faces. . . . The fat *tabernero* held the brandy bottle. Jeff pushed it away.

"Brannon—?"

"Gone, señor. His *campadre* with him."

Jeff swore under his breath, tried to get up. Two miners, their hands stained vermilion by cinnabar ore, helped him. The Mexican seaman who had been with Brannon pushed up to Jeff and began a great outpouring of Spanish. Jeff couldn't understand a word of it. He stumbled by the man and out of the barroom. Jan Bentley was descending the stairs as he reached the hallway. She gasped and whispered, "What happened?"

Jeff told her, "Brannon."

"Matt's here?"

"He was here."

"But he wasn't to leave his boat!" Jan explained. "He was to stay aboard and keep watch!" She glanced into the barroom and guessed what had drawn Brannon there. "Men!" she said furiously. "Pleasure and brawling always have to come first!" She took Jeff's arm, led him to the stairs. "Come up and I'll fix that cut over your eye."

Don Miguel Grazia arrived just as Jan finished treating Jeff's injury. He bowed

to the girl, shook hands with Jeff. His hair, eyebrows, mustache and goatee looked as though rinsed with quicksilver. He was tall, gaunt, his features hawkish and his skin sallow. His forebears had been Castilians, perhaps Conquistadores, for Don Miguel was of the Old Blood. Except for the huge and elegant sombrero he held in his left hand, his clothing was Americano—rusty and threadbare with age. His dark eyes were pouched and his skin was etched with myriad tiny wrinkles. Jeff had been told by Jan Bentley that the *Californio* had once been a rich land-owner but now was on hard times. His only possession was his Barquino Mine, a small one—the sort called a gopher hole by the big mine-owners. He was a little nervous.

"The flasks are ready, señorita," he said in stiff English. "Your man will go with my *Capitan*, who waits outside." He gave Jeff a thin smile. "It is of the bargain, señor, that you do not tell from whom you get the mercury if you are caught by a *Yanqui* patrol."

Jeff glanced at Jan, thinking of Herb Mitchell who might even now be bringing a patrol to break up the smuggling. He could see that the girl had the same uneasy thought. He looked back at Don Miguel and said, "I understand. I'll tell nothing."

The three thousand dollars was paid, Don Miguel trying to conceal his eagerness as he accepted it. He bowed again to Jan, spoke to her in soft Spanish, then turned to Jeff. "We go now, señor."

Jeff followed him downstairs and Matt Brannon's *compadre*, the Mexican seaman, was waiting in the hallway. He began gesturing excitedly and spouting in Spanish. He clutched at Jeff, who asked of Don Miguel, "What's he saying?"

"He asks your help, señor. He is off the boat you are to meet."

"Tell him to go up and talk to the señorita, will you?"

Don Miguel translated, then he and Jeff went on. The seaman stood where they left him, still talking and wringing his hands.

A GROUP of riders came galloping up as the two men stepped from the building. Jeff counted seven of them. They jerked their mounts to a halt, swung from the saddle, all of them talking loud and laughing. One of them caught Jeff's eye. He was a giant of a man in a gray hat and a long black coat. Even in the darkness, the square-linked watch chain draped across his patterned vest glinted. There was no mistaking Captain Jack Nichols, the train robber and self-styled Confederate guerrilla.

Jeff watched them troop into La Posada, and Don Miguel, following his gaze, said tolerantly, "Senor, this place has been a rendezvous for smugglers and highwaymen for more than half a century." He noticed Jeff's frown, read his thought. "Do not worry. Senorita Bentley is safe here."

They turned across the roadhouse yard to where stood two horses and a mule all saddle-rigged. A thick man with a shaved head and a dull mask of a face stepped from the shadows and Don Miguel said, "This is Pedro, the *capitan* of my mine. He is a deaf mute but there is no better man anywhere. He will guide you to the quicksilver cache, then to the beach where the boat waits." He smiled in his thin way. "And if he should be captured by a patrol, he cannot betray me."

Jeff nodded. "If we're captured, I'll be a deaf mute too," he said.

They mounted, Pedro upon the mule. Don Miguel rode off in one direction through the darkness and Jeff and his silent guide in another. Away from the rowdy La Posada, the night was pitch black and tomb silent. A perfect smugglers' night. . .

It was a two-hours' ride from La Posada to the Barquino smelter in the dark hills. A warehouse loomed and Pedro unlocked its wide door with a brass key that hung from his neck by a chain. He struck a match, lighted a lantern.

The building was a cavern filled with a thick darkness one lamp wouldn't light. Jeff made out iron flasks in wooden crates. He counted fifty of them. There were other flasks, some filled with mer-

cury and others ready to be filled.

There was a sound of hoofs. A Mexican entered with a white jenny mule. Behind the jenny came a long string of other mules, small Spanish animals. All were rigged with pack saddles.

Jeff got to work and this was in his line. He had packed freight in the Sierras and Washoes before the war. Four flasks were loaded onto each mule, two to a side. Jeff's expert packing drew a vigorous nod of approval from Pedro, who helped him, and Jeff guessed that the mute was comparing his work with that of the man who had been here at the Barquino on the other trip—Herb Mitchell.

It didn't take long, with Jeff's skill and Pedro's great strength. When the last heavy flask was lashed in place, the white jenny was led from the warehouse. The other animals willingly followed. Jeff took to his horse, Pedro to his mule after relocking the warehouse. The other Mexican had vanished.

Jeff loosened the Colt in his waistband. He rode drag, while Pedro rode by the white lead mule. The way led through dark wooded hills. There was no trail.

Pedro was an all right guide. He was a cat in the dark and could find his way through the sycamore and pine forests without a misstep. He seemed to be able to smell gullies and briar patches. Without a doubt he had prowled these hills in search of new veins of cinnabar ore. But he was a mining man and knew little about handling pack animals on a trail. It was Jeff who kept the string moving, and swung about after stragglers.

But the outfit moved steadily. At midnight, from a high ridge, Jeff glimpsed the sea. He heard the pounding of the surf, caught the smell of the salt water. Then for perhaps two hours, the outfit plodded between low hills beyond view of the ocean.

Once Pedro turned the mules into a clump of trees and gestured a warning to Jeff. They held the outfit there for many minutes and at last four riders passed a hundred yards beyond the trees. One rider had a lantern tied to his saddle horn to light their way. Jeff guessed that it was a patrol on lookout for smugglers. He wondered how the deaf Pedro had sensed their coming.

When the riders were gone, Jeff and his guide put the outfit on the unmarked trail again. They neared the sea once more and finally, when Jeff judged it to be two hours until dawn, they topped a low hill and looked down upon a small cove.

A small sailing vessel stood warped to a jetty. No lights showed. No crew member was in sight until the pack string descended the slope, then a voice challenged, "Who're you, there?" It was Matt Brannon's voice.

Jeff called back, "You know who we are, Brannon!"

Matt Brannon muttered an oath. "Randall!" he said sourly. "So that's how you got to La Posada. The girl brought you along to pack the stuff out here. All right; bring your string to the pier. But don't try anything with me. I've got five men aboard and they'll side me if you make another fool play like you did at La Posada."

"What's the matter, you leery of me?" Jeff mocked. He saw Brannon now, standing by the sloop's mast. "I'm not done with you, Matt," he went on. "I'm going to keep on your trail until I get my half of six-thousand dollars."

"You'll have some traveling to do." Brannon sneered. "I'm sailing for Mexico as soon as that mercury is aboard."

Four men came up from the sloop's cabin. Jeff led his first pack mule onto the jetty, swung it close to the boat's side. He unloaded the crated flasks, swinging them one by one over to Matt Brannon's crew. The fourth flask was received by the seaman who had hit Jeff with the wine bottle at La Posada. Jeff let go of the heavy crate a little too soon, on purpose, and the seaman staggered under its weight. That wiped away his mocking grin.

Jeff glanced toward Matt Brannon, who still stood by the mast, overseeing the loading. Brannon had his knife out of its sheath. He was trying its edge on his thumb. Jeff caught the ugly glint in Brannon's eyes. It made him feel at his Colt, caused a chill along his spine. Matt Bran-

non looked as though he wanted to even matters for what happened at La Posada. And except for Pedro, who had no reason to side him, Jeff Randall was one against five.

CHAPTER VI

Last Shipment

MATT BRANNON came over to the side and growled, "Hurry it up! I want to shove off before daylight. Dammit, Randall, you want me to be here when the sun comes up—so I'm caught by a patrol?" He strode back and forth, ranting like that, working himself up into a temper. There was no call for it; the flasks were being stowed aboard the fishing boat as fast as six men could handle them. Pedro was leading the unloaded mules back off the jetty. Jeff was heaving the flasks over the boat's rail to Brannon's men as quickly as he could remove them from the animals. More than half were already stowed aboard.

Maybe it did appear like slow work to Brannon. It seemed more likely to Jeff that Brannon was merely trying to find fault, and singling him out for abuse. The burly redhead seemed to need an excuse to work himself into a fury and, Jeff told himself, *He wants me to call him, so he and his toughs have reason to jump me.* He began to see how it was. Matt Brannon wanted him off his trail, wanted to be rid of him for good, and he could achieve that by forcing a fight—in which Jeff could be killed.

"Get a move on, you son!" Brannon bellowed.

It was more than a man would have taken with better odds. But Jeff swallowed it and let Matt Brannon curse him. He saw that the man was armed with a gun as well as with that knife he favored—and that the other four also wore guns.

Brannon, however, wasn't going to let up on him. Jeff probed his mind for some out. He had sent forty flasks aboard now, and there were ten more to go. Four on each of two mules and two on another.

Jeff had it, then. He took out his pocket knife as he swung the first of the three animals close to the boat. He opened the blade, gave the jack mule a jab with the knife-point. The jack snorted, jumped high. It swung around and let loose at Jeff with its hind legs. The other two waiting animals began to act up. Matt Brannon cursed louder than ever. Jeff ducked the flying hoofs, leapt back along the jetty. He started to run for the beach.

Brannon caught on then, and yelled, "Get him! Get that son—!" His gun roared. Boots pounded on the jetty planks as the crew came after Jeff.

He made it to the sandy beach, darted through the unladen mules, waiting there. Pedro saw that something was wrong and he, too, broke into a run. The crew was shooting now, wildly, and Jeff had no time to reach his horse. He plunged into the brush and kept on running. The shooting let up but Jeff could hear Brannon, still yelling crazily, telling his men to search the brush. Jeff worked his way up the slope, crouching low and screened by bushes and rocks; then he topped it and was sheltered by trees. A little later, coming from the timber, Jeff found himself on a road.

IT ran north and south and he believed it to be the stage trail. He turned north, knowing that if he kept walking north he would come upon the branch road to La Posada. But he had no more than taken the road when there was a clatter of hoofs and a creak of wheels. Jeff had no time to take cover. A band of horsemen followed by a carriage and team came swinging around a sharp bend. Dense trees and the darkness had hidden them from his view until the cavalcade was upon him. Jeff darted to one side, then stopped dead when a voice bellowed, "Stop, you! Stop or I'll blast you!"

There was no mistaking the voice or the huge figure of Captain Jack Nichols. He and the riders behind him had reined in. Jeff was covered by Nichols' six-shooter. The carriage pulled up. It was the rig that had conveyed Jeff and Jan Bentley to La Posada when they left the stage-

(Continued on page 118)

Owlhoot Gunhand

By LAURENCE DONOVAN

Illustrated by
William Meiflink

HE was too young to be wearing the unmistakable brand of defeat upon his good-looking face. The blooded, white-starred bay was too fine a beast to be bearing a master whose mouth had the ironical twist to be found only in a killer.

"We're nearin' the end of the trail together, Blaze. One more gun chore; and this one's needful to see you're put into the hands of a right hombre, boy."

There was such bitterness in the rider's voice as comes only with the certainty that death is not far ahead. The tone went with the keen suffering in the man's blue eyes.

The blooded bay pricked up its ears and shook its head as if it understood the words of its red-headed rider. The low-pitched talk went on as they came down the darkening street where lights were beginning to appear in the windows of frame buildings.

"I'd put you up for a rubdown and oats, Blaze, but there's no time for waitin'," said the rider, his left hand easing the weight of his double-gunned belt under a new mackinaw.

This no-good citizen had the righteous air of one who has made himself a right smart play and no one knew this better than The Idaho Dude—but he couldn't prove his facts because this no-good citizen was riding a clean road at present. Yet things do spill—like gold—and if a man's road happens to be clean, sometimes a wised critter can be far-seeing enough to realize that every man who rides can't cover the tracks of a back trail

"That shell's a dud, you sneakin' coyote," he exclaimed, as the gun that was in his hand made the room swell with thunder.

He straightened then from a saddle slouch, seeking to lessen the constant throbbing of pain under his ribs. He pulled his white Stetson a little to one side so that it made him appear outwardly jaunty and alert.

"Nary ranny in Chinook has ever met up with the Idaho Dude."

No more than the ghost of a grin relieved his taut mouth as he thus named himself. His darting eyes took in the lighted windows. One of these revealed a bright lamp burning inside a small building that was attached to a larger square of steel and stone that marked it as the jail.

The rider could see a runt-sized man seated with his feet on a desk. The desk lamp showed a star and outlined a partly bald head.

"That would be the law dog they call Calhoun," thought the rider. "Buck Reagle said he was little but hell on wheels. I'm thinkin', Mr. Sheriff, you

wouldn't be settin' so peaceable-like if you knowed the Idaho Dude was ridin' into your town."

It could have been a defiant brag, but the red-headed rider's next words were those of a man in whom all boastful pride was passing out along with the life that he knew was soon to end.

"The Idaho Dude? Hired killer. Never done a good deed for any man. A low-down snake—crawling to meet another snake for pay."

The muttered words ended with a mean cough and the rider's figure bent some with the pain under his ribs where a bullet had stayed in his lung.

He came erect and scanned upper windows above a brightly lighted store building. One window bore a name. The rider repeated it.

"Justin Flynn, attorney."

THE DOOR to the office was at the top of a stairway on the dark side of the store building. The red-headed rider who had tied his horse behind the store stepped in.

Justin Flynn looked up but did not remove his shiny boots from his desk. He was a big man, middle-aged but well dressed and undoubtedly well-fed.

Flynn's face was dark and he wore sideburns that added to an air of respectability. His black eyes scrutinized his visitor with what appeared to be careless interest.

"Well, you want something, young man? Most strangers are polite enough to knock."

The redhead stepped toward the other man without speaking. His blue eyes had shown suffering as he was riding, but now they were icy. He placed a scrap of paper on the desk, but kept a hard thumb upon it.

Flynn studied the penciled writing at a glance.

"So you're the Idaho Dude, huh?"

"Buck Reagle says so, fella. You know Reagle's writin'."

Justin Flynn stiffened and his head came up. It was evident that he felt himself to be a citizen who rated respect. He looked into the Idaho Dude's cold eyes and his mouth tightened.

"Yeah. Buck Reagle wrote it and—"

"I've got no time to waste," cut in the Idaho Dude. "Who's the hombre you want killed, and where do I find him?"

"Wait a minute, you gun-hungry fool." Flynn was making an effort to maintain the dignity he had long rated in the town of Chinook. "I ain't said I'm hirin' the first gunhand that comes along."

The Idaho Dude stepped back and flipped the Buck Reagle note into his palm.

"We'll pass that up," he said. "Sure, you're a highly respected law shark, store owner and money-lender who helps his friends off their ranches, one way or another. Seein' you know Buck Reagle, you're the same kind of a low-down buzzard as me. Now who's this you're so all-fired anxious to have salivated before tomorrow, the fourteenth, as you wrote Buck Reagle?"

Flynn's black eyes glanced through the window, observing the street outside.

"I don't know that I'll be crowded into—"

"I said I've no time to waste," rasped the Idaho Dude. "It'll cost you fifteen hundred, cash in hand. Save your churchgoin' manners for them that don't know better. Lay down the money and name the man."

"Fifteen hundred?" exclaimed Flynn. "It's too much. There's only this one lone rancher, six miles up Beaver Creek. It isn't worth that much, seein' there's only his wild buck kid on the place with him."

"Whope, fella. You say there's a kid. That wasn't mentioned."

"Well, he isn't a kid exactly, being twenty and grown, and I was meaning to tell you," said Flynn. "There's no neighbors. You can finish the both of them and be out of the Chinook country without it being known you was in the state—"

The hard, short laugh of the Idaho Dude stopped Flynn.

"That'll be three thousand, you bargainin' sidewinder."

"I won't—" began Flynn.

The dull blue barrel of a gun came up inside the Idaho Dude's mackinaw. "Three thousand. What's the name and the why of it? Lay down the money, talk, and it stays between us. Do you want it that way or do I have to change my plans and start posse-dodgin' after they find you, Flynn?"

The big man's tongue licked his dry lips. He put a sheaf of bills on the desk.

The Idaho Dude flicked the folding money, nodded, and stuffed it inside his shirt.

"Let's have it, pronto, Flynn."

"He's John Tanner, and he's an unsuspecting old coot," said Flynn. "You take the only valley trail due east, up Beaver Creek. Six miles up you come to a log house and barn. The same trail goes on out of Montana through a notch in the Bearclaw. Easy to lose yourself in the Utah badlands then."

THE IDAHO DUDE'S face was whiter than it should have been, but his eyes stayed agate-hard.

"And your deal is what, Flynn?"

"Tanner owes me three thousand on a note due tomorrow, the fourteenth. I've hinted I'm meaning to renew the note, but he tapped a steady water vein with that three thousand, and his ranch will be worth ten times the note. More to me, because I already own most of the graze land below in Beaver Creek Valley."

"This kid . . . twenty . . . wild buck son, you said?" The Idaho Dude's voice was low but edged. "And Tanner must have cow hands, hasn't he?"

"Nope, no cowhands. Isn't stocked up. Been using all he could rake together to keep Beaver Creek full the year 'round. Now he's got it, and—"

"So, you mangy coyote, Flynn, it means you're grabbin' off the valley," interrupted the Idaho Dude. "All right, fella. I'm not raisin' my price, but how'd this old Tanner figure on meetin' your note?"

Flynn lighted a cigar and leaned back, his smile as pleasant as the grin of a cougar about to make a kill.

"That's why I had use for a cold killer like you, Dude. If old Tanner found out I wouldn't renew his note tomorrow, the bank right here in Chinook would lend him twice the money on account of the new water supply. You see—?"

"Yes, Flynn. I see. An' Buck Reagle said there hasn't been any rustlin' or killin' in the county since this Calhoun come to be sheriff. Wormed your way up fast since you rode with the Reagle bunch eight years ago, haven't you, Flynn?"

"Damn you, Dude. We'll keep that out of it. That son you asked about. He was kind of a wild buck for awhile, but he's steadied down. Got to liking the gal teaching school here in town. Saw him start out home with the old man late today, and they don't either one tote hardware. Told John Tanner I'd ride out early tomorrow and we'd fix up that note—had me on edge waiting for you to show up. That's all of it."

"Yeah?" The Idaho Dude choked back a cough and flicked a hand across his mouth. "Why would an unknown owlhoot rub out the Tanners all of a sudden, Flynn?"

Flynn smiled and rubbed his sideburns.

"That's where I'm smart, Dude. Word happened to get around that old Tanner's blasted a small pocket of gold going after that underground water, and that he's been caching some in his house against buying stock come next spring."

"Makes you smart, fella," assented the Idaho Dude. "But it ain't leavin' proof for a double killin'."

Flynn produced a small leather sack.

"Some pea nuggets in this," he said smugly. "Pulling up a few bricks of the fireplace won't take long, and this'll look as if it was spilled. Simple, isn't it, seeing I'll be sitting in a card game tonight, and riding out right early in the morning to come onto the crime."

The Idaho Dude kept a hand under his mackinaw.

"I'd ought to double the price, but I won't," he said. "I'm sure admirin' a buzzard that's slicker'n I thought. Seein' you have to have an alibi makes me feel right good, Flynn. If the steal didn't lay like it does, I'd be thinkin' maybe you'd

have in mind the law's put six thousand reward on my hide, dead or alive."

Flynn nodded his big head. "Sure. I was knowing that or I wouldn't have contacted Buck Reagle. This way, you're not known in Montana, and if Sheriff Calhoun ever had a reward notice on you, I haven't seen the same. Like every other gunhand, you're yellow underneath, and—"

"Drop it right there, you smelly varmint." The Idaho Dude spoke through his teeth. "You haven't the guts to try crossin' me, even if it wouldn't pay off. You've made yourself a deal, and when I take on a chore I finish it."

The Idaho Dude coughed and caught his breath sharply.

"I need a drink, and I'm not honin' to show in any of the Chinook saloons, Flynn. I'll take what's left in that bottle you been hittin' to hold your nerve."

JUSTIN FLYNN'S black eyes never seemed to leave the window overlooking the street. He had the righteous air of a good citizen who has made himself a right smart play.

There was half the redeye left in a quart bottle. The Idaho Dude swallowed half a pint at one gulp and slid the bottle into his mackinaw.

He straightened his thin shoulders.

"If I had your mind and your bloodless heart, Flynn, I'd be bossin' a town somewhere myself."

Flynn stroked his sideburns. "You said you haven't got time to waste. Don't overlook spilling that gold, and when I ride up to the Tanner place in the morning I'll have a renewal note in my pocket."

"Right trustin' old coot, this Tanner," said the Idaho Dude, and nodded. "I'm not so trustin', Flynn. I know all you've put out is so, but I'm livin' on account of never takin' an eye off my back trail."

The whiskey had stiffened the Idaho Dude. With his creamy Stetson on one side he was a jaunty figure easing back through the door at the top of the outside stairs.

"You're takin' a heap for granted," he said. "I could just ride away with your foldin' money. And what proof would you have, Flynn?"

The big man of Chinook shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm not that dumb," said Flynn softly. "Don't forget Buck Reagle sent you, and Reagle's in for a split that'd put you between hell and high water if you got ideas."

The Idaho Dude smiled thinly and nodded.

"Think I wasn't knowin' how I was tied into this, you pious packrat? If you happen to want any women or kids burned out, send for me. *Adios*, you greasy hypocrite, and you'll be smart to set in that game until nigh daylight tomorrow."

The Idaho Dude glanced down the dark stairway, saw it was clear, and closed the door. He heard the muttered oath of the ruthless buzzard inside the office, but he could find no satisfaction in having voiced his contempt for the respected Justin Flynn.

The Idaho Dude held to the stair rail going down. Back beside his hitched bay he finished off most of the whiskey, but kept some for a final lift.

He led the fiddle-footed gelding back of frame buildings in the darkness. The light of a saloon made a shine from a rear window.

The Idaho Dude held up here.

"Comes an end to every trail, Blaze," he half whispered into the bay's receptive ear. "The high-and-mighty Mister Flynn's got blood on his hands from away back, but he's settin' right nice, and all I've got is the same kind of blood on my hands that won't ever wash off."

He leaned tiredly against the horse. Out in the street a woman laughed happily. Chinook was a peaceful town, too peaceful, and it had given a low-down skunk like Justin Flynn his opportunity to hire such as the Idaho Dude to do his killing.

"I'm bettin', Blaze, there's folks here who're thinkin' that yeller-belly is a great man," murmured the Idaho Dude." A smart one, he is. Makes it look like he's doin' others a favor when he's only lend-

in' them money to steal their homes."

There went Justin Flynn along a lighted stretch of street that the Idaho Dude could see. Big and pompous, was Flynn, walking with his head high, wearing an expensive store coat.

The Idaho Dude suddenly tightened his teeth.

"Me, Blaze? In all my life I haven't done any man a good turn. Got kicked around as a kid. But I never wanted anything I couldn't get. Not till now, Blaze, and now I can't get it."

Perhaps it was the woman who came along, a young woman. The Idaho Dude saw the woman turn and walk with Justin Flynn, with Flynn's arm around her shoulders. Then they passed from view.

"Never done any man a good turn . . . bloody hands. . . ."

Possibly the whiskey was stirring his brain. The bay horse nuzzled his shoulder.

THE LIGHT from the saloon's rear window lay across the saddle. The Idaho Dude scribbled with a pencil on a torn envelope he got from his mackinaw.

A minute later the blooded bay was turned into the street and the Idaho Dude was riding straight. He could see the lighted window of the sheriff's office and beyond that there were but a few scattered frame shacks.

The laugh of the Idaho Dude was low and hard. "Won't be needin' but one gun, Blaze. Set in your game, you slimy snake, Flynn."

The Idaho Dude tightened the bay's reins, touched him lightly. There was no one in the street to notice the bay horse that broke into a bolting run.

The Idaho Dude passed within a few feet of the jail-office window. There was no humor whatever in his hard grin as he saw the bald-headed Sheriff Calhoun looking at some papers on his desk.

There was the lightning flick of the rider's hand. The blue-steel gun that smashed through the sheriff's window was one of the prized .44s that had taken a wide and bloody toll.

"When I take on a chore, I finish it!" he roared.

"Hit it, boy!" The low voice of the Idaho Dude sent the blooded bay skimming up the street and out of town.

In his office the runty lawman with the steel-gray eyes stared at the gun that had hit his desk through the broken window. Sheriff Calhoun had reached his door, but he only heard and did not see the fast-running horse that was leaving town and bearing toward the east.

The horn-butted .44 had been unloaded. The lawman who had the rep of being hell on wheels pulled a tighly rolled paper from the muzzle of the gun.

He might have been expected to move swiftly, but the gray eyes only glinted. He went to the door once more. Apparently no other person had heard the breaking of the window.

Instead of taking action with the haste that would seem called for, Sheriff Calhoun pulled out a drawer and riffled through some papers. He held one and studied it.

"The Idaho Dude." The sheriff's mouth was thin. "Yeah. Six thousand reward."

He looked again at the scribble on the paper from the blue-barreled .44.

"I'm one damn' fool, I guess," muttered the lawman. "But it's a chance I'll have to take. I play out this hand alone and win, or I'll throw my badge in Beaver Creek and keep on riding away from Chinook."

Two miles from town, the Idaho Dude deliberately turned back and retraced a mile of his back trail. Then he waited a little while and finished off the whiskey before he rode again toward the ranch of old John Tanner.

The ache under his ribs was a fierce burning now.

THE SUN was an hour up when its brightness slanted through the open doorway of the snug log ranchhouse. The light finger picked out the crumpled figure of a black-haired youth lying just inside the doorway.

Blood had run down from the youth's head, leaving a rusty dried streak across his neck before it had soaked the sleeve of his shirt.

The sun crawled on across the plank floor of the room until it showed a man's gray head pillowed upon his bent right arm. The old man's left hand lay across the stock of a shotgun.

There was a third figure on the floor. The sun was not required to bring out the flaming red hair of the Idaho Dude.

In this moment of the gruesome dawn the only moving creature was a blooded bay horse that cropped on the yard grass where the fine beast with the white-starred forehead had been tied to the fence.

Up near the horse corral close to the log stable a cow gave a drawn-out bawl. It was the suffering complaint of an animal that was perhaps a couple of hours overdue for milking.

Down the trail by the Beaver Creek bridge, the lone driver of a red-wheeled buckboard had pulled up a team of matched sorrels. The driver had been surveying the ranch buildings with furtive caution.

There was no doubt but that he could see the saddled bay horse tied to the yard fence. He had held his team here, some hundred yards from the ranchhouse, for some ten minutes.

A big man, the occupant of the buckboard scrutinized all the sunlit surroundings with an air of suspicion. One hand had loosened his expensive store coat and apparently made sure that a gun could be brought into use quickly.

It was the insistent bawling of the cow that brought decision.

John Tanner was not the kind of a man who, if alive, would keep an animal waiting for relief.

The driver was just starting the team when he pulled up again. The presence of the saddled bay horse had troubled him. But his eyes were pulled to half a dozen black shadows wheeling in a circle over a spot not far beyond the log house.

Where black buzzards hovered against the bright morning sun there had to be death. The buckboard driver climbed down, tied his team near the creek bridge and started walking.

THE IDAHO DUDE could hear the cow bawling, the movement of the buckboard and then the slow, cautious steps as boots crunched upon gravel. In this moment the owlhoot killer was tense, summoning all his will power to remain motionless and to keep the final black fog of death from blanking out his brain.

Justin Flynn had his hand under his coat as his bulky figure nearly blotted out the sunshine in the doorway. He stood there, his hat pushed back, his dark face showing the marks of a sleepless night.

Flynn's wide shoulders heaved as he

looked down at the crumpled, bloody body of the black-haired youth. The haggard look slowly faded from Flynn's face and a grim, hard smile crossed his mouth as he saw old John Tanner lying with his gray head pillowed on his arm, and a hand touching a shotgun on the floor.

Flynn darted quick glances over his shoulders and an oath of satisfaction jumped from his tongue as his black eyes centered upon the bent, still figure of the red-headed Idaho Dude.

"Damned if there's beating luck when it's riding with yuh," said Justin Flynn. "Couldn't be a sweeter setup . . ."

The Idaho Dude lifted his head slightly then and spoke:

"Flynn . . . you gotta help me. Your chore's done, but the old coot blasted my leg . . . gotta get to my horse an' ride . . . Can't move and you can't have me found here. Get me to the bay and I'll make it—"

Flynn spread his heavy legs. The Dude's hand was coming slowly from under his coat and it was empty. The Idaho Dude had often dreamed that some day he would hear the devil laugh in hell, and he knew now how it would sound.

Flynn had partly drawn his own gun, but he thrust it back.

"Help you, Dude? Sure 'nough I'll help. The great Idaho Dude, and you wasn't smart enough to outgun an old codger and his damn' kid. Too bad, just too bad."

Justin Flynn stooped quickly and picked up the double-barreled shotgun.

"Look Flynn—" The Idaho Dude's voice was weak. "All hell, you couldn't—"

The big man of Chinook lifted the shotgun slowly, made sure it held one loaded shell. He stepped around old John Tanner and he was but a few feet from the red-headed owlhooter. Flynn's tongue licked at his lips.

The Idaho Dude came as near screaming as any man could when his voice is but a hoarse whisper:

"No, Flynn! Don't kill me—there's not enough of this gold you give me to make it look right—think of yourself, Flynn—!"

"I'm thinking, you blundering killer." Flynn's tone was hard, gloating. "Maybe the gold isn't enough, but you're overlooking you've got three thousand I gave you, and I'm not forgetting six thousand the law's ready to pay."

The shotgun hammer clicked back.

"No . . . Flynn! Buck Reagle said you'd be square—you lowdown swine . . . you don't dare do it! Reagle will—"

"To hell with Buck Reagle!" rasped Flynn. "I'm getting the valley cheap. Wait'll I show the renewal note I fetched out for old Tanner to sign. Help you, Dude?—Here's the help you get!"

The big man tightened his finger and the shotgun hammer fell. There was only a dull click.

Flynn swore savagely. The Idaho Dude laughed then, with death in his voice.

"That shell's a dud, you sneakin' coyote," he said.

Flynn was big but he was quick-minded. His hand snatched the gun from under his coat.

The Idaho Dude didn't seem to move. But the gun that was in his right hand under his mackinaw made roaring thunder in the room. Flynn triggered, but the lead went wild as his gun hand was ripped by the redhead's bullet.

Flynn attempted to scoop up his gun with his left hand.

"I wouldn't, Flynn!" The voice from the doorway of the lean-to kitchen was thin and cold. "I'd only have to bust your other arm! I'd split your brisket, but I want the folks o' Chinook to see the hangin' of the smelliest hypocrite I've ever met up with."

Bald-headed Sheriff Calhoun slouched against the lean-to doorjamb, his old .45 steady.

"You don't believe . . . you can't take the word of a wanted killer! Why, he's the Idaho Dude, and he shot down the Tanners . . ." Justin Flynn's final blustering died on his trembling lips.

OLD JOHN TANNER was sitting up, rubbing his right arm where it had been cramped. Young Tanner, with the blood dried on him, was on his feet.

"Danged if I'd ever have believed it, Flynn," said old Tanner. "It didn't seem like there could be such a livin' snake. You had to put it onto yourself. Sheriff, how about him?"

Cold-eyed, Calhoun was snapping Justin Flynn's wrists into steel. Old Tanner had indicated the Idaho Dude, who hadn't arisen.

"Give the Dude a swig of your liquor, John," said Sheriff Calhoun. "Maybe it'll ease him some."

The Idaho Dude lifted his head on his hand, but that was all.

"Nope, mister, a last drink won't help any," said the redhead faintly. "I'm only askin' Tanner to see that Blaze—my horse—is treated . . . treated—"

"Yeah, Dude," and old Tanner was lifting the owlhooter's head. "Your hoss will have the best. I ain't feelin' right, though—I mean that six thousand reward—*I* didn't take you, son—"

The Idaho Dude grinned against a final torture in his eyes.

"I said in my note to the sheriff how it was, mister. I haven't in all my life ever done any man a good turn . . . not until now. You can't take that from me. Like I told the sheriff, I knowed this was my last ride—"

"You have to keep that six thousand, Tanner," interrupted the grim little lawman. "It's the one good turn the Dude's done for a lot of folks in Chinook."

The gray eyes of the lawman warmed some as he went over and gripped the owlhooter's hand.

"That's the way you want it, Dude?"

"The way I want it. I told you with an empty gun, sheriff . . . I'm thinkin' maybe . . . maybe— *Adios*, Blaze."

THE IDAHO DUDE was dead. But there was a little smile on his lips. There was a suspicion of moisture in the coldest eyes of the law in all Montana.

Justin Flynn walked from the log house with the stiff legs of a man who has seen more than one man swing at the end of a rope. Flynn's big shoulders shivered as he saw the buzzards circling low over the sheep that had been killed for the blood that young Tanner now was washing from his face and neck in the water of the horse trough.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Nobody asks that question when he buys a cigarette, or reaches for a radio dial to tune in on some band music, or selects a tube of toothpaste. But the American people know that the leaders in every line of merchandise are leaders because of quality and not for some other reason.

That's why the SPEED magazines command the following that they do. The SPEED symbol on a magazine cover GUARANTEES the top in entertainment.

A SPEED MAGAZINE

TRADE CHIEF'S MEDICINE

By JAMES BENNETT

THOSE avaricious capitalists, the early Missouri River traders, used one device in their operations that has always been used by traders everywhere in dealings with their more backward brothers—that is, they got the chiefs on their side wherever possible and then worked things to the mutual profit of themselves and the corrupted chiefs, if not to the profit of the rest of the backward brothers.

A fine example of this is one that involved Blackbird, a renowned chief of the Omahas. Blackbird, possessed of mighty vanity, executed feats of reckless valor in order to win the admiration of his tribesmen. His real power over his followers, however, he owed to the white traders.

On a visit to St. Louis, the ambitious chief greatly impressed the traders who saw in him an excellent means for exploiting the red men. They appointed him a 'trade chief" and presented him with a medal and a handsomely engraved commission. Blackbird then returned to his people and became one of the most unscrupulous "trade chiefs" ever appointed.

When the traders would visit the Omahas, Blackbird would first take whatever he wanted from the white men's goods and then see to it that the remainder was traded to his people at terms exorbitant enough to delight the heart of any business man. Thus he became a prime favorite of the Missouri River merchants.

But the Omahas soon began to grumble. Blackbird asked the traders for help in keeping his authority firm. The traders had a simple answer.

From then on, Blackbird was gifted with supernatural power in predicting the death of any tribesman who arose to oppose him. He would simply state that at a certain time the argumentative fellow would be gathered to his fathers, and sure enough this would happen. His people then became so much in awe of him that almost none dared cross him in any way.

But there was still one man in his tribe who continued to speak against Blackbird. This was Little Bow, a brave very popular with the Omahas. So, of course, Blackbird decided to remove the troublemaker.

Little Bow, returning home after a long hunting trip, noticed his squaw was behaving strangely as she prepared his evening meal. So Little Bow, suspicious, forced her to eat the meat herself. Then, dying, she confessed that Blackbird had frightened her into mixing with the meat a dose of his terrible medicine.

The secret of the chief's strange power was now revealed. The white traders had given Blackbird a large supply of arsenic, with instructions on how to use it. Little Bow and two hundred followers at once moved away and built a separate village.

But Blackbird's power continued until his death from smallpox in 1800. Towards the end of his life he murdered his wife in a rage. Such was his authority that he was never punished. He became enormously fat, and when he attended a feast he would be carried in a buffalo robe by four warriors. At his death he was buried in a large burial mound by the river. It was named Blackbird Hill and for many years was a prominent landmark on the Big Muddy.

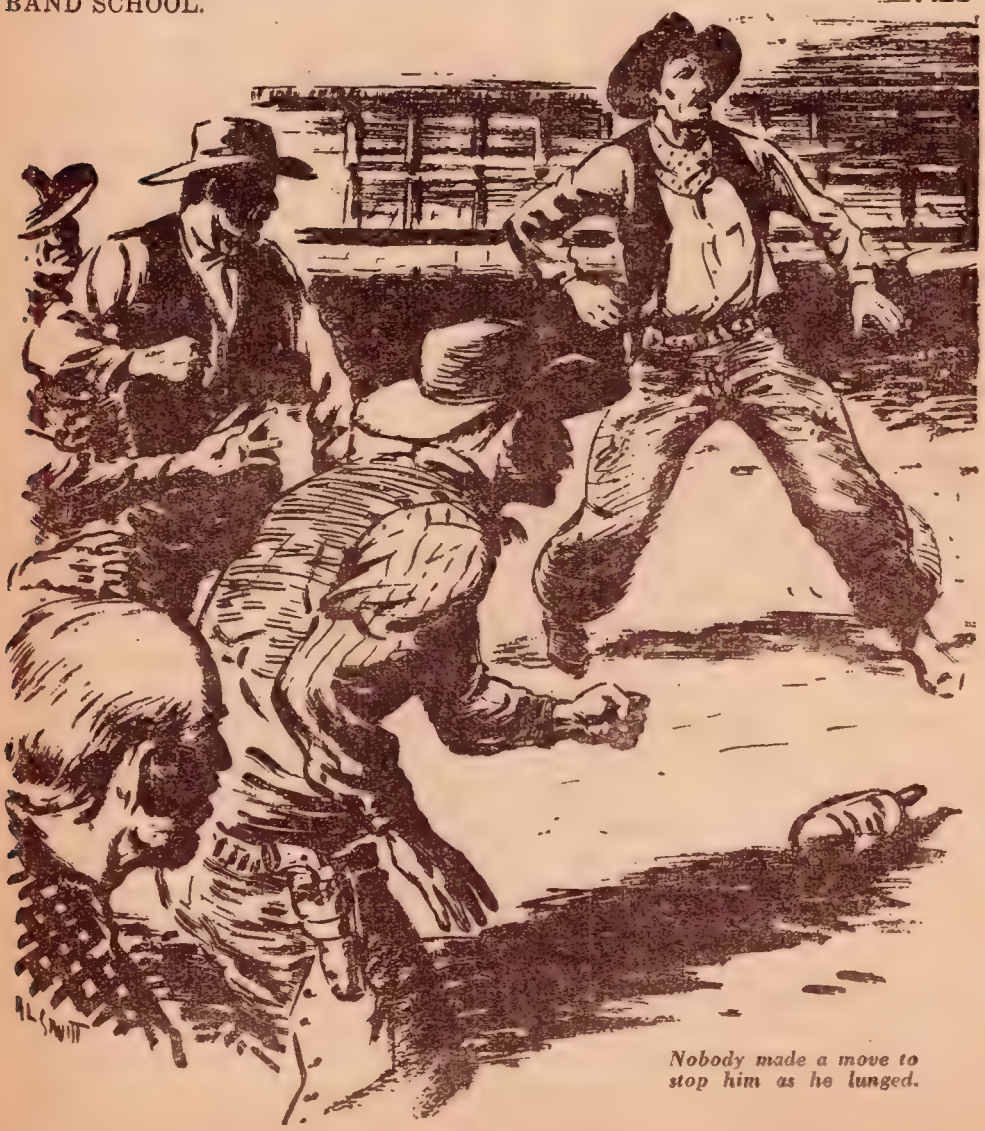
Gabe Blows His Horn

By BEN FRANK

THEY called him, "Gabriel-blow-yore-horn."

He came to Hopewell in a rickety old covered wagon behind a team of skinny white horses, rented a tumbled-down store building and hung a sign in front of it, which said, "GAETH BAND SCHOOL.

Then he unloaded the covered wagon. First, a hugh bass drum. Then a battered bass horn. Boxes of music. Some folding chairs. A tarnished brass peck horn. And a silver cornet which he kept wrapped in a red silk cloth when he wasn't playing it.



Nobody made a move to stop him as he lunged.

Folks were half-way in the notion that a band would be a good thing for Hopewell—until Gabe blew the top right off of a mighty plan that was perpetrated by a few tumbled-down cowmen

Illustrated by Al Savitts

It took Gabe Gaeth two weeks to find that Hopewell didn't have much taste for band music. But he wasn't the kind who gives up easily. Besides, he liked the town. He liked it because it had some shade trees and a creek of clear, mountain water. And, too, he'd fallen hard for Sue Hilton, who had a knack for frying steak and making lemon pie—two things that Gabe enjoyed next to cornet-playing.

He wasn't much to look at—tall, in-

clined to run mostly to bones, sandy hair and sad wistful eyes. But when he unwrapped his silver cornet and began to play, most people forgot about how he looked. Especially Sue Hilton. Sometimes she'd get a dreamy look on her pretty face and let a steak burn—but not often.

On his third Wednesday morning in Hopewell, Gabe finished playing himself a concert, put on his battered derby hat and crossed to Sue's lunch room. The place was buzzing with excited talk. It seemed that three masked men had help up the outgoing stage the night before and old Sheriff Pete Lyddon was taking the south hills apart in an effort to find the bandits.

Gabe listened to the talk, remembering vaguely that he'd heard considerable about the masked bandits since coming to Hopewell. He didn't join in the talk for he'd discovered that the less he said, the less people noticed him and poked fun at him.

He drank his coffee black and unsweetened. He tried to roll a quirly but he wasn't good at it. And when he saw the men watching him, he tried to look unperturbed, even a little bored, but he wasn't good at that either. Inside, he had a lost, helpless feeling.

"Blow any walls down today?" Sid Palmer asked.

It was Sid's opening line to an old gag. The men in Sue's lunch room exchanged grins. Sue had her back to Gabe, so he couldn't tell whether she was smiling or not. He hoped she wasn't. He touched a match to his bulky cigarette and glanced cautiously at Sid.

Sid Palmer had thin lips in a handsome face. A big man, a flashy dresser, a black-handled sixgun in a slick holster. A man who, so everybody said, was going places in the ranch business.

Gabe shook his sandy head. He slid from the stool and unfolded his lean, loose-jointed frame. The motion was too much for the quirly. It fell apart and the tobacco spilled over Gabe's shirt front.

Squat Bender and Rake Fitch, Palmer's two cow-hands, let out with whooping horse laughs. Gabe felt a rush of blood to his head and guessed that his face and hair were pretty much the same color. He moved toward the door, bumped clumsily into a chair, found the door and stumbled outside.

THAT'S the way it was: Gabe trying to fit into the scheme of things in the bustling little cowtown of Hopewell and finding himself a square peg in a round hole.

Maybe, he thought sometimes, he'd have been better off if he'd stayed in the East, but remembering the crowds and the coal smoke and the noise, he shuddered. After living in the bright, clean air and under a limitless, blue spread of Western sky, he knew he could never go back East.

He followed the street to the small, shabby building with the ancient sign that said, GAETH'S BAND SCHOOL, and went in. He flopped down on a folding chair and plucked the silver cornet from among the silky folds of the red wrapper. It had been his father's cornet but there wasn't a dent in it. His blue eyes went over the dreary room and its furnishings, the bass drum, the battered bass horn, a tall stack of music. These were the things his father had left him. These and the ancient sign that hung by the door. His father had been a band man and a music teacher but he hadn't been a good *business* man.

Gabe put the cornet to his lips and began to play sadly and softly. The horn was more than a cornet to Gabe. It was his only real friend. Without it, he reckoned life wouldn't be worth the living.

He closed his eyes and forgot to play softly. He forgot the joke that Sid Palmer had started about him. A few days back, a wall of an old stone building had caved in and Sid declared that it had fallen down when Gabe had hit a high, loud note. The joke caught on fast. Sheriff Lyddon said maybe there ought to be a law against Gabe blowing his horn in town. Even the kids took it up and yelled at Gabe, "Gabriel, don't blow yore horn!"

The rusty door hinges creaked and Gabe stopped playing. Sid Palmer came into the room, grinning around a toothpick.

"Heard you tooting," he said, "so I thought I'd drop over."

Carefully Gabe put away the cornet. You could never tell about Palmer. He might take a notion to kick things around. And if he did, Gabe guessed he couldn't do much about it. Gabe wasn't a scrapper with his fists. He'd always been warned to keep out of fights because of the danger of getting his lips injured. A split lip was no good for cornet playing.

The grin left the big rancher's face.

"Just wanted to warn you," he said. "Sue Hilton's my girl. Just in case you might get some foolish ideas, I—"

A commotion in the street interrupted him. He turned and walked through the door. Sure of himself. The kind who does things without wasted effort or motion.

GABE followed him with wide, sad eyes. Then he shoved to his feet and followed the rancher through the door. Sheriff Lyddon and his two deputies had just ridden into the street, their sweaty horses kicking up a fog of dust. They hadn't found the masked bandits and the sheriff was in a bad humor.

"Lost all traces of them after we got across the second range of hills," he said. "Too many rocks and canyons. Like lookin' for a flea on an elephant."

Sid Palmer grinned hugely and turned his eyes on Gabe.

"Sheriff," he said, "why don't you take Gabriel-blow-yore-horn with you? Maybe he could scare them owlhooters out into the open."

The deputies grinned but the sheriff merely cussed under his breath and went stamping toward his office.

Palmer, looking pleased with himself, swung into his saddle. His two cow-hands, grinning at the joke, followed suit, and the three rode out of town toward Sid's Crooked-S spread.

Gabe saw Sue Hilton standing in the doorway of her lunch room, laughing at something. He had a feeling she might be laughing at him. He felt his muscles tighten. He reckoned that someday he was going to lose his temper completely and slug it out with Sid Palmer. Even if he did get his lips smashed so much that he could never again play the cornet.

Face grim, he went back into the old building. Restlessness seized him, so he grabbed up his silk-wrapped silver cornet and headed down to the creek. It was nice there, with scattered cottonwoods on the banks and the water clear, deep and cool. He followed the creek downstream, found a comfortable rock and unwrapped the shiny instrument.

The grimness left his bony face. He snuggled the mouthpiece against his lips and began to blow. He could play the old horn like nobody's business, and in a minute he'd forgotten everything but the sparkling, clear tones. Gabriel-blow-yore-horn was lost in a world of sweet sound.

But not for long. Something slapped against the back of his head and ran down his neck. He jumped to his feet and looked wildly about. A long-legged kid was hoofing it back toward town and the remains of an over-ripe tomato lay splattered near the rock where Gabe had been sitting.

He was all set to chase the kid when he saw Sid Palmer on the other side of the stream, laughing so hard he had to hang on to his saddle to keep from falling. Gabe didn't chase the kid then, for he knew who'd put him up to tossing that tomato.

Footsteps sounded behind him and Gabe turned. He felt foolish when he saw who was coming along the path toward him and he knew he looked it.

It was Sue Hilton. She came up to him and she wasn't smiling. In fact there was an angry gleam in her blue eyes and a grimness about her full, red lips that he'd never seen before.

"I heard your music," she said, "and I walked down this way. I got here just in time—here let me help you."

It dawned on Gabe then why she was angry. She was angry because the kid had hit him with the over-ripe tomato. His heart began to pound and when she touched him as she cleaned away the spattered tomato, he felt weak. Maybe, he thought, she not only liked his playing but liked him some, too.

"Gabe," she said, "did you know that

Sheriff Lyddon used to play a bass drum when he was a young man?"

Gabe swallowed and shook his head.

"And," Sue went on, "Charley Clump, the express agent, plays a clarinet. And there are others around here who have played some kind of a band instrument at one time or another. I've been talking to them and they're about halfway in the notion that a band would be a good thing for Hopewell. I think you could talk them into helping you to get one started."

Gabe glanced across the stream. Sid Palmer hadn't missed a thing. His big fingers twisted at the bay horse's mane and a grin still played across his face. But there wasn't any grin in his eyes.

"Gabe," Sue said, "play something for me."

Gabriel-blow-yore-horn sat down on the rock again and began to play and Sue Hilton's eyes turned sort of dreamy. Across the stream, Sid Palmer dug spurs into the bay's ribs and clattered along the trail toward the Crooked-S.

THE next day, Gabe cornered the white-whiskered old sheriff and talked to him about playing the bass drum.

Lyddon pawed at his handle-bar mustache and stalled. "I haven't got no drum, young feller."

"You can use mine," Gabe offered.

"Sue Hilton's put you up to this, I reckon," Lyddon said. "Well, let's go talk to Charley Clump an' see what he says. I reckon I'd do a little drum-beating if he'd do a little tootin'."

They crossed to the express office and found Charley Clump dozing in his chair. At first, he denied he could play anything. Then, grinning sheepishly, he dug a battered clarinet from under a counter and wiped away the cobwebs.

"Reckon, Gabriel-blow-yore-horn, if you can fix this ol' squawker up so's it'll work, I might try to play it again."

Gabe looked the instrument over and reckoned he could fix her up as good as new.

He and the sheriff ambled over to the saloon and talked to Spilly Shere, the barkeep. Spilly admitted that he'd at one time played a slip-horn and that it was still stuck around some place in his attic.

The sheriff stayed on at the saloon to watch a checker game, while Gabe walked on alone to the end of town where the church stood. He found Preacher Larson sweeping out the church. Gabe offered to help, and at the right moment approached the parson about the idea of a brass band in the town.

The preacher thought it was a good idea and guessed he could blow a bass horn again if he had a little practice and a horn to blow. Gabe offered to let him use the old battered bass he'd brought from the East. The preacher seemed pleased. He shook hands with Gabe and allowed that Gabe might be an asset to Hopewell in spite of his playing the cornet on Sundays.

Gabe felt good about the way things were beginning to shape up. On the way back to his tumbled-down building, he stopped in to see Sue. She wasn't alone Sid Palmer was in the lunch room, working his way through a big steak and so were his two cow-hands, Squat Bender and Rake Finch. Gabe lost his good feeling.

"Hear tell there's a good tomater crop this year," Rake Fitch said.

"Yes." Squat nodded. "They're gettin' ripe, too."

Both men laughed hoarsely.

Undaunted, Gabe climbed up on a stool and had a cup of coffee, black. He drank it slowly, thinking he'd outstay Sid and his men. He finished the drink, tried rolling a cigarette and messed it up.

"Blow any walls down today?" Sid asked.

Gabe didn't answer. He felt his anger rise but he'd always been careful about letting his temper get him into a fight. A cornet player couldn't run the chance of a split lip or a broken front tooth. He slid from the stool and went outside. He guessed there'd be another time when he could tell Sue how things were working out.

THEY met that evening in Gabe's old store room—the sheriff, old Charley Clump, Spilly Shere and the parson. Each man knew of someone who might be interested in the band. In no time at all, Gabe had a list of names of prospective band members. They elected officers for the new Hopewell Band. The sheriff, president. Preacher Larson, secretary and treasurer. And Gabe, of course, the leader. Then the meeting broke up.

Alone in the big room, Gabe felt a quiet, satisfying happiness. At last he was getting things under way in the town he'd chosen for his home. It was the kind of a thing he liked to do and could do best. Once he got a band started and the people interested, they'd be wanting their kids to learn how to play an instrument. That would mean lessons for Gabe to give and a market for musical instruments. Gabriel-blow-yore-horn began to dream. The dream was pleasant, which called for music. He played his old cornet long after midnight, his eyes closed, contentment in every line of his bony face.

The next day he went over to the express office with Charley's repaired clarinet. The sheriff was there, pulling at his whiskers and cussing under his breath. It seemed that the payroll to the mines up in the hill country had come to Hopewell a day early and would have to remain in the express company's cracker-box of a safe all night.

"I don't like it!" Lyddon growled.

Charley didn't like it, either.

Neither man had time to talk band, so Gabe left the clarinet and ambled down the street to the saloon. He saw Sid Palmer inside, a booted foot on the brass rail, his fingers bent around a small glass. Gabe didn't go in. He went on to the lunch room.

"Hello," Sue said. "I hear things are getting started."

Gabe nodded. "Thanks to you."

A faint trace of pink came into the girl's cheeks. Gabe climbed up on a stool and pretended not to notice.

Two ranchers were talking as they ate.

"I hear the mine payroll's at the express office," one said.

The other man nodded. "Came a day early."

Sue frowned. "It seems that everyone knows about it," she said. "Looks like they'd keep it quiet."

"You can't keep a thing like that quiet!" a rancher growled. "Too many people saw the shipment come in."

"I reckon Lyddon'll keep an eye on that old safe," the other man said. "Leastwise, I would if I was sheriff."

Gabe finished his coffee and went outside, carrying with him the memory of Sue's warm smile. He saw Sid Palmer leave the saloon and cross toward the harness shop. Gabe waited until Sid had gone inside before he went on back to his store building. Meeting Sid would have ruined the memory of Sue's smile.

Once inside the drab room, he unsilked his cornet and began to play. It was a rippling tune, the kind he always played when things were going right and he felt a warm inward glow. He guessed he was beginning to get a foothold in Hopewell. Beginning to become a part of the life about him.

LATER, he saw old Charley Clump lock up the express office and go on home as if having five thousand dollars in his safe was an everyday occurrence. Gabe wondered about that but didn't let it worry him then. After all, Charley had been an express agent a long time and should know his business.

But when Gabe saw the sheriff and his two deputies ride out of town to the west just before sundown, he felt a tinge of real surprise mixed with a little worry. Everybody knew that three masked men had been swooping down out of the hills and helping themselves to things that didn't belong to them. Also, it was no secret that the express safe was about as good as no safe at all. It seemed to Gabe that the sheriff and Charley Clump were playing pretty careless, leaving that mine payroll unguarded.

That evening Gabe had a big steak at Sue's and topped it off with a piece of her marvelous lemon pie. He thought about asking her if she'd like to take a

walk in the moonlight after she'd finished her work, but decided against it. She looked tired. He went back to his building, thinking that a girl like Sue shouldn't have to make her way, cooking for every Tom, Dick and Harry. She should have to do no more than cook for one man and take care of a nice house under some big shade trees.

It was a pleasant thought, so he dug his silver cornet out and played for an hour, sitting there with the moon streaming through the window. After that he wrapped up the cornet and crawled into bed.

He was never sure what woke him up. Maybe it was the wind rattling the loose siding on the building. Or it could have been the snort of a horse. Anyway, one minute he was asleep, and the next, wide awake. He sat up, staring about in the darkness. The moon still came through the window, falling white over the big bass drum. He slid his feet into his shoes and shuffled to the window.

Long shadows reached into the street and all seemed quiet, except for the banging of the loose board. Then a movement caught his eye.

Two men walked out of the shadows and headed across the street. One of them turned and looked back. His face had something wrong with it. And then Gabe saw what was wrong. The man wore a mask. A moment later both men disappeared into an alley. Gabe felt his heart begin to rap at his ribs.

HIS eyes whipped back to the shadow from which the men had emerged and made out the dim outlines of three horses at the foot of the sloping street. A man stood with them, watching them, keeping them quiet.

Gabriel-blow-yore-horn didn't need anyone to tell him what was up. The outlaws from the south hills were after the mine payroll in the express office. And he remembered that old Charley had locked up and gone home, that Lyddon and his deputies had ridden out of town.

It was up to Gabe, and he knew it, to save old Charley Clump and Pete Lyddon from a lot of trouble.

His eyes swept back into the long store room, stopped on the bass drum standing in the path of moonlight. That was it, the drum and the stack of music—stampede the three horses, leave the outlaws marooned on foot in the town.

He ran to the drum, gave the head a kick and winced when the tight calf-skin popped and split. But this was no time to worry about drums, when Charley and Pete needed help.

Quickly he stuffed handsful of loose music into the drum and carried it to the door. The street was quiet. Even the standing horses blended so with the shadows that Gabe had to look twice to make sure they were still there. He opened the door carefully and set the drum outside. The street sloped toward the horses. The wind was in that direction, too. Gabe lit a match, held it to the music until the pages began to blaze, and then gave the drum a shove.

It rolled like a huge blazing wheel down the slope, with the tumbling papers flaming and the wind whipping at the fire and scattering burning sheets along the street.

The horses snorted and leaped. The outlaw cursed and fought them to a standstill. A burning sheets of music circled into the air and came down on a horse's flank. That almost did it but not quite. The man knew how to handle horses. He jerked them back on their haunches and kept them circling.

The flaming drum rolled on and the animals quieted and Gabe realized that his scheme hadn't worked. But he still had one more card to play. He caught up the silver cornet and put it to his lips. He sucked in a deep breath and let go.

The horn fairly screamed and the echo of the blast beat up and down the street furiously. It was Gabriel really blowing his his horn, but instead of waking the dead, he was waking the peaceful, sleeping citizens of Hopewell.

But it did more than that. It brought the two bandits scurrying from the alley. They cut through a strip of moonlight

and ran for their horses. Before Gabe could get out a second blast, they were in the saddles and fogging out of town as if they had a hurricane at their heels.

Right on top of Gabe's second blast, the door to the express office burst open and the sheriff and his two men came pounding out into the street. Then old Charley Clump came hobbling after them. Clump and Lyddon were turning the air blue with choice cuss words.

"Where's that blasted horn-tooter!" the sheriff roared.

And then he spotted Gabe and swung across the street, puffing and sputtering like a derailed locomotive.

"Just as we about have those owlhooters walkin' into our trap," he roared, "you have to scare 'em off!"

He said a lot more, with old Charley helping him out. It seemed that the whole thing—the story about the money arriving a day early, the sheriff and his men riding out of town, old Charley locking up and going home—was simply the setting of a trap. The sheriff and his men had slipped back to town under cover of darkness, and with old Charley, had entered the express office through an alley door. There they'd waited hopefully. Just when it looked as if the outlaws would get the back door to the office open and walk into the trap, hell had broken loose in the street. By the time Lyddon and his men had discovered what was going on, the three outlaws were safely on their way back to the hills.

Gabe stood listening to all this with his mouth hanging open and his spirits sinking to zero.

"I didn't know," he mumbled. "I thought—"

People were gathering around, some thinking it was funny, others not so sure, but enjoying the excitement. Even Sue Hilton was there, her eyes refusing to look at Gabe.

THE sheriff sighed heavily and let his shoulders drop. He was suddenly a tired old man who had lost most of a night's sleep for nothing.

"Anyway," he said, "I won't have to play a drum in any brass band, so I might as well resign."

"And," Charley Clump chimed in, "if yuh aren't playin', I'm not neither!"

A cold, hopeless anger stirred around inside Gabe. How was he to have known about the trap? How—

"Listen," he began, "you two act as though it was me—"

A horseman came up fast in a whirl of dust. He slid to the ground and pushed into the moon-splashed circle of people. The light hit his face. He was Sid Palmer.

"What's all the excitement, Sheriff?" he asked.

The sheriff told him.

Sid laughed. "That's a good one," he said. "I an' the boys just started for the ranch and heard the yellin', and hosses running. I sent the boys on an' rode back to find out what had busted loose. So Gabriel blowed his horn once too often?"

"He sure did!" Lyddon agreed.

Sid Palmer's eyes fixed on the cornet tucked under Gabe's arm.

"I reckon it's time his horn-blowing was stopped," he said.

He reached out a big hand and jerked the cornet out from under Gabe's arm. He lifted the instrument high and it gleamed in the moonlight.

"Sid!" a woman screamed.

But Gabe didn't notice the woman's voice or know that Sue Hilton had made it. He was staring wide-eyed at Palmer's bay horse, which had moved into the bright moonlight. He let out a croaking yip and pointed a stiff finger at the animal.

"Sid's one of the bandits!" he said. "Grab him!"

THE cornet dropped from Palmer's fingers and landed in the dust with a metallic thud. His fist streaked out and caught Gabe on the chin and sent him sprawling beside the silvery instrument.

"Call me a bandit!" The big man wheezed. "You horn-blowing tramp!"

He caught his horse and leaped into the saddle.

"Don't let him get away!" Gabe panted.

(Continued on page 117)

DRIFTER'S TRAIL

NEAL PETREE got on the stage at Desert Crossing and the driver had to wait while he counted out a palmful of small change to pay his fare. There was another wait while Neal dragged his worn old saddle and his battered soogan up on top of the coach.

By JOHN JO CARPENTER

It was plain to Neal that this supposedly respectable citizen had traveled far down the whiskey road and although Neal felt this condition was none of his business he found it was

But the driver was well along in liquor and the stage was already running late, and until Neal opened the door and started to climb in, the delay did not rest heavily on his conscience.

Then he saw the girl. Immediately he remembered his tattered appearance—patched levis, faded scarlet shirt, battered Mexican sombrero, and a worn leather vest that a self-respecting Indian would not have worn to a grasshopper feast. Also, Neal was acutely aware that he smelled. These last few days had been hot and water-holes were few and far between.

"Oh . . . excuse me, ma'am," he stammered. "I sure didn't expect to . . . to—" He gulped and went on lamely because his experience with women was limited. "I reckon I better ride up on top. I . . .

His big fist smashed into Neal's temple, and nothing could be heard but old Adam Curtwright pleading with Neal.

Illustrated by Frank Volp

I'm not very good company, ma'am."

He slammed the door, embarrassed to agony, but it did not shut out the picture that had been engraved on his mind in those brief moments. He could still see her small oval face, pink with the heat, her level gray eyes, and the yellow curls that objected to imprisonment under the green velvet bonnet.

"Where do you think you're goin'?" The alcoholic driver snarled at him. "Go on back inside where you belong, cowboy!"

He cracked the whip. The fresh team lurched into a strain. The coach rocked away. Neal stood there a moment until he remembered that every dime he had in the world was tied up in transportation on it.

He ran after it, caught the handle, yanked the door open and swung aboard. Yes, his memory had not tricked him—he and the girl were the only passengers. He'd have to ride with her, just the two of them alone in the coach, all the way to Pinto.

"You almost missed it," she observed.

Neal flushed and nodded. He had quit school back in Missouri in the sixth grade, ten long years ago. It was doubtful if he had exchanged a dozen words with a girl his own age in all the intervening time.

"Yes," he said. "She . . . she almost run off without me."

His eyes fell to the crude bachelor patch on the knee of his levis. He looked up and saw that the girl was examining him. Again he flushed.

"Been hunting horses up in the Three Sisters. The gullies there are full of fine wild stock but I didn't get none," he explained. "My own horse ate some loco and I had to hoof it sixty miles to the Crossing, packin' my saddle. But I would have cleaned up a nice stake if I hadn't of lost my pony. I had a nice bunch of thirty-odd worked into my trap in a blind coulee—or almost into it."

"I imagine you would have," she said. "It must be interesting."

And the first thing he knew, he was telling her about it. Things he had not given a second thought to before now suddenly seemed interesting and important. He had been three and a half weeks alone in the Three Sisters. It was hard to make her understand that it was not scary or lonesome, or dangerous. it was—well, it was just all right.

"Seems to me the driver has had a mite too much to drink," he said once as the coach suddenly lurched ahead without warning. He frowned. "He's got three span on, and those leaders was a little spooky. I wish—"

But the team settled down and apparently the bibulous driver got them under control again.

"I'm going to live in Pinto, at least this winter," the girl volunteered. "My father is in business there. I haven't seen him since I was eleven. I've been living with my aunt in Minneapolis. When she died I came on out, without letting Father know. It will be entirely a surprise to him."

"I'll bet he'll be tickled," Neal said sincerely. "What kind of business is he in?"

"I believe he has some kind of an inn. Maybe you've heard of him—Adam Curtwright."

"I reckon not," Neal said. "I've never been over the border into California either. This is the farthest west I've been, too. Been all over Texas and as far north as British Columbia, and I did get over into the Oregon country once, but—"

Suddenly he remembered that this was a girl and a rather nice-looking, well-mannered one at that. His flow of words dried up without warning. He sat there looking dumbly at her, until she flushed and turned her own gaze out of the window.

THE seemingly endless flats came at last to an end here and the road dipped down into wet-weather stream beds, dry now and deep enough to be called canyons. The six horses drew a continuous stream of comment, most of it profane, from the driver. He had sense enough to throw over the brake-pole as

they went down but the light, near-empty vehicle rocked dangerously as the six horses scrambled up out of coulee after coulee.

Neal knew the answer. The driver had been drunk when they left Desert Crossing—but not this drunk; the answer was that he had brought a bottle with him.

Neal looked out of the window. They were climbing steadily, cutting through the low pass in the burnt-red desert mountains, on the other side of which lay Pinto. The road would get worse before it got better. So would the driver.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Neal said. "You won't mind if he comes back here to ride with you, will you? I'm afraid he ain't in no shape to handle six head."

For the first time, the girl's eyes showed alarm. The physical danger apparently did not impress her as much as the sudden realization that she was out here in the middle of the Great American Desert with two strange men. One of them, obviously, was roaring drunk and he was the employee of the line, the man upon whom she had automatically depended for protection. The other was a penniless wild-horse hunter, patched and sweaty and needing a shave.

Neal shouted up at the driver and got only a profane whoop in reply. The whoop startled the horses. The driver shut up and Neal could tell that he had flung himself back on the lines in a quick realization of his peril.

Yet the coach continued to gain speed and as they swung around a hairpin curve Neal could see the leaders bounding like rabbits, heads back, running wall-eyed with the bits between their teeth.

He yelled at the driver again and when he got no reply he clambered through the window and got a hand on the baggage-rail on top. He let his feet swing free and pulled himself up. The driver's quart bottle, half empty, was bouncing around between his feet. He swayed drunkenly with his feet against the dash, his whole weight swaying against the lines.

But he fought like a bear-cub when Neal tried to take the lines away from him, and the youth finally got them by sitting down on the driver's lap and taking a turn around each wrist. He let the horses run until they reached a short, straight, steep upgrade. Then he stood up and threw his weight back, swaying from side to side and shouting commandingly.

He stopped them. The driver got out from under, slobbering and swearing. Neal threw the brake-pole over and braced his feet against it, locking all four wheels. The driver came at him, snarling and swinging. Neal bunched the lines in his right hand and jabbed twice with his left, and then with his leg managed to catch the driver before he slid off backward.

"Ma'am!" he called. "Ma'am, you'll have to lend me a hand! Let me ease him down to you."

The driver came to as he reached the ground. Moaning, he obeyed orders to get inside. Neal kicked the bottle overboard. It struck a rock, broke, and spilled cheap fumes. The girl wrinkled her nose and looked around indecisively.

"I wonder if you'd mind if I rode up there with you?" she pleaded.

THAT'S how they came into Pinto. They reached the barren little town just as dusk settled, and the girl exclaimed in disappointment. There were a dozen frame buildings scattered on both sides of a wide, dusty street. There were twenty or thirty adobe buildings, most of them one-room houses that were barely huts.

"But this is 'downtown' to a thousand square miles of country and to all the people living in it," Neal tried to explain. "It's not so bad when you get used to it. Now in Texas—"

He pulled up in front of the Commodore Stockton Hotel, an imposing two-story shack of unpainted clapboard exterior, but nevertheless the biggest building in town. A fat, dirty old man came out to stand and ask simple-minded questions and scratch himself. The driver tumbled out and reeled away in search of more liquor, and the girl went inside the coach to collect her baggage.

"Who's the little filly?" the fat man asked, "and who's she here to visit?"

"Her father, Adam Curtwright," Neal said. "Where'll she find him?"

"Adam Curtwright? Don't 'low as how I know him."

"You surely know him! He's in business here."

"No Curtwright in business here!" the fat man said positively. Then a leer crept across his flabby mouth. "Unless, 'y gonnies, you mean old Curt! I never heard what his full handle was. But I guess it could be said he's a 'business man,' at that!"

"Where will I find him?"

The fat man pointed to a mean-looking little adobe shack two doors down from the hotel. It was set back from the street and the wide front "yard" was littered with parts of old wagons, farm implements, and other nondescript gear. Neal looked at it, and to the fat man, and he suddenly stepped close and jabbed his forefinger into the sagging stomach of the man.

"Listen, you! Give this young lady the best room in your flea-bag until I can run down who her father is. And if there is one word said to her—*one word*, my friend—well, you can draw your own conclusions!"

"Who . . . who's going to pay for her keep?" the man quavered.

With his tanned flesh showing through his own clothing, Neal answered, "I'll guarantee it if her father can't and she can't. You probably know everybody in town. You might stay healthy by circulating around and passing the word that this girl's stay here must be pleasant!"

"Glad to, young feller- -plumb glad to!"

The fat man seized the baggage that the girl handed out and hurried into the hotel.

"They tell me your pa is . . . is out of town on business but expected back any minute," Neal lied to her. "You go on into the hotel and have supper, while I hunt him up."

"But I'd much rather go right to my father's house," she said.

"Oh . . . why, he . . . why he lives in the hotel, too!" Neal said. "Come on." He let the jaded team stand while he hurried her into the hotel. To the fat man he said meaningly, "Give her a room adjoining her father's."

"Her . . . her father's room?" the other said.

"Her father's *rooms*, not room!" Neal shot back. "But I reckon you'll take good care of her."

He set the bags down and hurried out.

FROM the moment the fat man spoke, Neal had been sure in his own mind who the girl's father was. He was convinced when he first laid eyes on "Curt." This man had slipped far down the whiskey road but once he had had the same fine features and the same intelligent gray eyes Neal had seen on the girl.

Curt's place was little more than a junkyard. There was no possibility that it could support one person, let alone two. How the man lived was obvious from the furnishings of the room. There was a small stove, a bunk, and a rude cupboard with a dirty curtain over it. These occupied very little space. Most of the room was taken up with a big circular table covered with oilcloth turned upside down and browned with countless cigaret butts. The man's thin, smooth, well-cared-for hands told the rest.

"Crooked gambler," Neal thought, "and not a very good one any more because he's ginned up too much. Pickings must be thin—a few fool Indians, a Mexican kid or two, and what drifters come through."

Adam Curtwright had passed out in the shade back of his house. He was still sleeping soundly, despite the night chill that had fallen. Neal seized him by the collar and dragged him over to the pitcher-pump and laid him down under the spout. He pumped steadily for half an hour, hoping the fat man had had sense enough to give the girl a room on the other side of the hotel, so she could not see.

When Curtwright struggled, Neal held him down with his foot. When he wept, Neal pumped harder. When the man was

sober enough to fight back like a man, Neal stopped pumping and grabbed him by the shirt and backed him up against a pepper-tree, so hard that its endlessly-shedding leaves showered both of them.

"Listen, you! Your daughter just came in on the stage. She has taken a room at the hotel, next to what's supposed to be yours. I threw fear into the fat party who runs the hotel. I aim to throw one into every man in town if I have to. As for you, my friend—you're going to be the Leading Citizen of this town of Pinto, California, for as long as it takes for this young lady to get her fill of the country. Savvy?"

"My daughter?" The man's teeth began chattering. He covered his face with his hands. "Give me your gun, kid. Let's get it over with quick. She doesn't know—"

"And she's not going to know!" Neal said grimly, shaking him. "What'll it be—furniture store? Postmaster? Feed yard? Cattle broker? I reckon that's the ticket. You're a cattle broker until further notice, the leadin' beef-buyer in Southern California."

Curtwright braced himself. Hope showed pathetically in his eyes. He rubbed his forehead.

"Let me think! Can't let Frances know the truth about her daddy. Kid, you run down to Jeb Larkin's furniture store. He's the undertaker, too. Tell him I want one of those black burying suits of his. While you're gone I'll take a bath. Then you come back and shave me. My hands are none too steady . . ."

THE thick-walled adobe barn was cool, compared with the inferno outside, but it was decidedly stuffy. Neal heaved the last forkful out of the window and leaned on his pitchfork, thinking.

These *Californios* were an all-right breed! The whole town of Pinto had entered whole-heartedly into the game and for two weeks the daughter of Adam Curtwright had been treated as though he were actually a prosperous and powerful cattle-buyer.

There had been invitations to outlying ranches, where people lived like kings. Adam Curtwright had been invited to "advise" the town council on the matter of improving the water supply. His mail increased suddenly, and if Frances noted it was all addressed in the same handwriting—the postmaster's own—she gave no sign of it.

As for Neal Petree, there had been only one job open in town and he took it. This was a slack season in this desert land. It was early summer and the range was not yet burned crisp. Cattle roamed free. Not for two months would cutting, branding and dehorning start. Neal had never thought he would come down to taming a manure fork in a livery stable for fifteen dollars a month. . . .

"But when you can read a man's brand through his pants, he's got to collect new ones however way he can," he said.

He hung the fork on its claw and picked up curry comb and brush. Footsteps sounded in the front room of the stable. He laid down the implements and yelled, "I'm coming!"

It was Frances Curtwright and a tall, muscular man with black hair, a clipped black mustache and low-cut sideburns. He was perhaps ten years older than Neal and thirty pounds heavier, and considerably richer in the world's goods, to judge by his clothes. He wore the pants to a suit of blue serge and the coat to it, but under the coat was a spotted calfskin vest and a yellow silk shirt. His boots would cost forty-five dollars in any man's store and a pearl as big as a cowpea gleamed in a ring on his little finger.

Frances smiled when she saw Neal and he flushed and stammered a greeting.

The man started to talk.

"Get out my team and hook them to my own buggy. I suppose the buggy's dusted? I left orders for it this morning," the man said.

"Oh . . . you're Palmer Thaleman," Neal said. "I'll get your rig out right away."

He had been caring for Thaleman's splendid team of matched blacks for two weeks without ever having seen their

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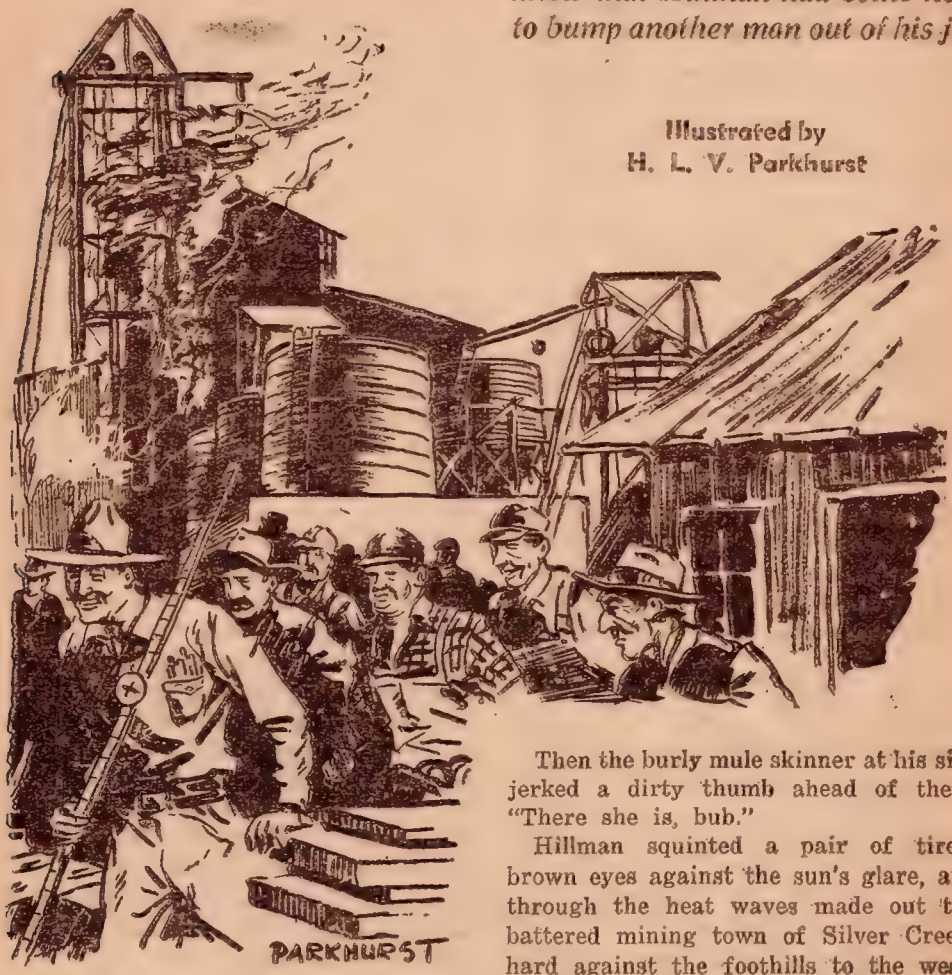
A MULE SKINNER RIOTS

By WILLARD LUCE

He tried to push himself out from between the two wheels, and he had almost made it when Davis struck.

It wasn't hard for Hillman to figure the play and already the construction crew was against him, each and every man. For he was the stranger in these parts . . . He was bigger . . . And they all knew that Hillman had come here to bump another man out of his job

Illustrated by
H. L. V. Parkhurst



THE HUGE ore wagon topped the rise, and the three span of mules stopped for a breather. The wagon seat emitted a creaking groan as Clyde Hillman shifted his large body to find a softer spot.

Hillman wasn't fat, just heavy and solid and hard, like a good keg of beer. His brown shirt and riding pants and lace-top boots were covered with a thin layer of alkali dust. He wiped the sweat from his round, deeply tanned face with a shirt sleeve, and as the slight breeze cleared the dust, he drew the clean air gratefully into his lungs.

Then the burly mule skinner at his side jerked a dirty thumb ahead of them. "There she is, bub."

Hillman squinted a pair of tired, brown eyes against the sun's glare, and through the heat waves made out the battered mining town of Silver Creek, hard against the foothills to the west. He wanted to laugh; instead he smiled, a cold bitter smile that twisted his lips and somehow revealed a hidden hardness that was in him.

Silver Creek! Only yesterday he had packed his bags, and with a pullman ticket for San Francisco in his pocket, he had gone into the office to offer his farewells. That was when Old J. B. Appleton had called him into his private office.

"I'm sorry, Clyde," the old white-haired man had told him, "but there's one more little job you'll have to do before you leave. Oh, I know—" He had waved a bony, white hand at Hillman's

protests. "—you've waited a long time for this trip, but another week won't make a lot of difference to you and it just might save the company from bankruptcy."

So instead of riding a pullman over the hump to California, trouble-shooter Clyde Hillman was riding a hard, bumpy ore wagon across the Nevada desert toward Silver Creek.

The sound of horse's hoofs broke into his thoughts and twisted him around on the seat. The rider was a girl, fresh and lovely and somehow out of place against the drabness of the desert. She wore a purple riding outfit over her slender, lithe body. Her eyes were a faint violet and her hair the color of maple leaves after the first frost.

Her lower lip dropped as though she were about to speak, until Hillman unconsciously puckered his lips into a low whistle. Then her lips closed into a straight line and the warmth left her face.

Hillman caught the force of her eyes like the chill of ice water. Then she kicked the bay with her heels and went past, her back straight, her head high in the air.

Clyde Hillman watched her until he felt the driver's eyes hard upon him. He turned and met Leo Weyand's anger-clouded look with a faint, amused smile.

The driver was a big man, as large as Clyde Hillman, maybe larger. He had a dirty, unshaven face that somehow matched his overalls and shirt. What fading had taken place to the original blue had been done by the Nevada sun and not by any water.

LEO WEYAND'S voice was flat. "You aren't going to like it in Silver Creek, bub."

Hillman raised his brow and clucked softly. "And just when I thought I was going to like it, too." His eyes followed the rider's shapely figure a moment longer, then turned to watch the irritation grow stronger on the driver's face. He wondered at this, for certainly the girl ahead was not the type for this unkempt muleskinner.

"That," Leo Weyand stated hotly, "is Joseph Messick's daughter Mary! No one gets fresh with Mary. Joseph Messick doesn't like it; neither do the rest of us."

"Oh, but I wouldn't think of getting fresh with her," Hillman asserted with bland innocence.

Then Weyand swung savagely toward him, his voice angry and sharp. "Leave Mary Messick alone, see? If you don't—" But Leo Weyand's eyes weren't angry; they were thin slits of cool, crafty speculation. Clyde Hillman knew then that Weyand had already guessed his purpose in Silver Creek and for some reason the muleskinner wasn't pleased.

This knowledge delighted Hillman. He made his voice meek and asked, "Who is this Messick you mentioned?" As he watched surprise flood the driver's face he decided Leo Weyand would make one hell of a poker player.

Then the freighter said, "Don't act so dumb. Joseph Messick is the big shot of the Appleton Construction Company out here, the guy you're going to work for. But you aren't going to like Messick any more than you'll like Stephen Thorn, and you ain't going to like the Appleton Construction Company one bit better."

"Why so? It was a good company to work for in Elko." Hillman kept his voice just at the inquiring stage.

"Maybe so. Maybe so. But it isn't any good out here. If you ask me, they're jinxed. Everything goes wrong and Joe Messick runs around like a hydrophobia coyote, blaming everyone but himself for the trouble. But just wait—you'll find out for yourself." Leo Weyand's voice was full of sinister promise.

The ore wagon arrived at the mill in Silver Creek that evening just at quitting time. Weyand pulled up the mules before a tar-papered shack and called out, "Hey, Joe, I got a new one out here for you!"

Joseph Messick came out of the shack, a big man with a heavy, suspicious face. "What do you do?" He didn't offer to

shake Hillman's hand. He made no effort to be friendly.

Clyde Hillman said, "I'm a rodman."

"Rodman? I don't need a rodman! I hired one yesterday. Who sent you anyway?" Joseph Messick's attitude was more than just unfriendly; it was hostile now.

Hillman stood up and thoughtfully climbed out of the wagon before answering. He noted the satisfaction now on Leo Weyand's face. The workers who had started down the hill had stopped. They were edging in closer, making a circle. In each of their faces, Clyde Hillman caught the hint of tense and hopeful anticipation.

HE turned to face Joseph Messick. "Elko sent me."

"Elko, huh?" Hillman watched Messick's lips thin out, his hot, red-rimmed eyes narrow down. The construction boss came closer and said, "You aren't a snooper?"

"I'm a rodman," Hillman repeated.

Messick's huge fist shot out and gathered in a handful of Hillman's shirt front. He lowered his face until Hillman could feel the anger of his hot breath against his face.

"If you are a snooper, you better take the first wagon out of here. I'm running this job and I can do it without any help from Elko. Tell Old J. B. I'll have his mill finished by the first, so he can stop losing his sleep. Tell them—"

Clyde Hillman might have let the shirt twisting go but it wasn't only shirt Joseph Messick had in his fist. As Messick twisted, Hillman caught the quick stab of pain as hair came out by the roots. His right hand made a quick swing upward, striking Messick's wrist and knocking the fist away from his shirt front. Almost at the same time, Hillman put his toe behind Messick's right foot and hit the big man hard in the stomach with his shoulder. The construction boss went backward, grunting heavily as he sat down on the uneven hillside. Clyde Hillman watched the surprise on his face give way to anger and noticed in both expressions a faint glint of admiration.

Hillman said, "Run your own errands, Messick. I'm a rodman, not an office boy."

What Messick's reply might have been Clyde Hillman never found out. At just that moment a new figure came into the circle. He was a small man with a dark, angry face. His words came out in puffs like the sound of a helper engine on a heavy grade.

"Rodman, huh? I'm the rodman here, see? Think you can just walk in and give Guy Davis a bump, huh? Well, you have things to learn, see?" With that he came at Hillman like a banty rooster.

Hillman took three stinging blows in the face before he got himself straightened around. Then he shot out a right at Davis' face. It landed all right, but the little guy was traveling with the blow and all the steam was lost.

It was then that Clyde Hillman got the idea. This wasn't just another mining town brawl. Guy Davis' face twisted and he acted like a guy insane with rage; but he didn't fight that way. He fought with the shifty craftiness of a man well versed in his trade. He didn't make any mistakes. And unlike a lot of other little guys Hillman had fought, he could hit like a damn mule.

HILLMAN took a right under the heart and tightened his lips against the pain. He threw his left and Davis faded out of reach. Clyde Hillman had fought in the ring enough times to know when he was out-matched and this was one of those times. And it wasn't hard to figure the play. Already the construction crew was against him, each and every man. But that was natural. He was the stranger. He was bigger. And he had come to bump another man out of his job. What's more, whipping the little guy in front of him would win him little respect from a tough construction crew. And if Davis whipped him—Clyde Hillman's smile was bitter, but not half so bitter as the thoughts within him.

Then Guy Davis came in at him again. The little man caught him with a left hook. Hillman staggered, then met Davis'

explosive right, full in the face. He shook his head in a stunned, hurt way. Things blurred before his face and his stomach retched. But his hearing was keen. Above the roar of the construction workers, two voices stood out. "Give him hell, Guy! Break his neck—he's nothing but a company man! Give him hell!" One of those voices belonged to Leo Weyand, the muleskinner.

Then Guy Davis hit him once more, knocking him backward against the wagon box.

A sharp pain caught him across the back and the air went out of his lungs. He tried to push himself out from between the two wheels. He had almost made it when Davis hit him a last time. Clyde felt himself going backward and down. With a sudden, sickening pain his head and shoulders smashed against the high-walled wagon box.

Even then he felt the wagon moving ahead and knew that Leo Weyand had started the mules. Desperately Hillman's fingers clawed at the hardwood sideboards. They slipped. For an instant they caught the front hound and he pulled himself partly beneath the wagon. Then his fingers slipped again and the last thing he felt before darkness closed in was the terrible, agonizing hurt of his leg twisting beneath him.

The first thing he felt afterward was the same leg paining him like old billy hell. He groaned and twisted, trying to get away from that agony. Then he felt a hand on his shoulder and heard a soft voice tell him, "You'll only make it worse if you don't lie still."

Clyde Hillman's eyes popped open like a jack-in-the-box. It was Joseph Messick's daughter, Mary, all right, wearing a nurse's uniform. Somehow Hillman had known her voice would sound like that. He smiled a little and this time she smiled back. He puckered his lips but he didn't whistle. He just said, "You!" in such a way that little spots of color came to her cheeks. All of which made him want to say, "You!" even more so. But he didn't. At just that time the doctor at the foot of the bed turned Clyde's leg over to look at the other side.

The red-hot shot of pain brought an involuntary groan to his lips. He felt Mary Messick's hand tighten on his shoulder and he reached up and put his hand over hers. He could feel the sweat coming out on his face.

He said, "What are you doing, Doc—taking it off or screwing another one on?"

"Neither, my boy. Of course you were lucky, not a bone broken. I don't see how you managed it, my boy. In a week's time you'll be as fit as a fiddle."

CLYDE HILLMAN didn't hear the other things the doctor said. "In a week's time—" Hell, it was already the twenty-fifth of August. In a week's time it would be too late to help Old J. B. Appleton. In a week's time—

Hillman remembered what J. B. had told him back in Elko. "If you can't stop the trouble at Silver Creek and if that mill isn't completed by the first of September, Clyde—well, there just won't be any Appleton Construction Company, that's all. Already the job's cost five thousand more than I bid. Every day after the first will cost me a thousand dollars penalty money, besides regular expenses." The old, white-haired contractor had sounded very much like a man already defeated. He had added, "You're my last hope, Clyde; the last hope I've got." And he hadn't sounded as if that hope were very strong.

Now Clyde Hillman shook his head, knowing how much Old J. B. was depending on him. "I can't wait a week, Doc. I have a job to do."

He saw the frown cross the doctor's face and heard Mary Messick's quick intake of breath. He heard her say, her words cutting like a lash, "Then you *are* a snooper!" She said it in the same way she might have called him a coward or a thief or a murderer.

He said, "If a man's doing his job, he has nothing to fear from a snooper, as you call it."

"And if he isn't doing his job?"

"Then it's time he started," he told her flatly.

Hillman's leg was swollen badly and discolored, but by keeping cold packs on it most of the night, he was able to step on it the next morning.

He was still certain that the fight with Davis had been staged, perhaps, with the idea of beating him up and running him out of town. He was just as certain that Leo Weyand had deliberately started the mules, hoping to catch him beneath the ore wagon's huge wheels. But of these things he had no proof. He could only wait and see what the day gave out.

After a long breakfast, he went out of the doctor's house to find Mary Messick waiting for him. She was seated on the same bay mare she had ridden the afternoon before. She held the reins of another horse in her hand.

"I see you are still determined to go to work." There was no friendliness in her voice and Hillman noted the shadows around her eyes. "Then you had better ride. No sense in making that leg worse than it is." She tossed him the reins of the second horse.

He smiled his thanks and got a tired, helpless smile in exchange. He gratefully pulled himself into the saddle and the two of them swung about and moved out of town toward the stamp mill without talking. It was one of those dead, embarrassing silences that neither seemed willing or able to break.

AT last Clyde Hillman leaned toward her and covered her hand resting on the pommel. "What is it that you're afraid of, Mary?"

She withdrew her hand and remained silent until he was afraid she wasn't going to answer. Then she looked at him and said with a simple honesty, "I don't know." Once she had started, the words kept coming out as though she lacked the power to stop them. "All I know is that everything has been going wrong at the mill — everything. Dad hardly sleeps any more and he's cranky as a bear. He says he could finish all right, if the office in Elko would leave him alone. They send letter after letter asking about this and about that. It takes half the night to answer all of them. They sent two men to find out what the trouble was and all they did was to cause more trouble. It's been like that ever since we started here." There was a dead hopelessness in her voice and somehow Clyde Hillman could find nothing to say that would change it.

The two of them moved out of town, without speaking at all.

They rode the remaining short distance in silence, Hillman understanding now Joseph Messick's and his daughter's dislike for snoopers.

Joseph Messick came out of the tarpaper shack as they reached it. "Well," he said, "I'm glad to see you're able to get around." This time he offered Hillman his hand. The trouble-shooter took it, not fully understanding this complete change of attitude. It could easily have been that Messick was genuinely sorry for what had happened the night before. It could just as easily have been that Mary had already told him Hillman's real purpose in Silver Creek and now that

he knew, he was unwilling to risk retaliation for his attitude, from the Elko office.

As Hillman got out of the saddle, Mary Messick took the reins. She said in a stilted, controlled voice, "I'll see you again at noon." She turned the horses back toward town. Hillman watched her straight, stiff back and knew there was no change of attitude in her. Once more he felt the complete loneliness which his job had to offer him.

Then Joseph Messick was talking again. "Would you like to look over the mill before you start?"

But Clyde Hillman shook his head and indicated his leg. He said, "Just tell me about it."

Messick nodded and pointed toward five huge wooden vats standing on a cement ledge. "Those are the cyanide leaching vats. They're our last big job and we finished them last night. Started to fill them about midnight. All we've got left now are a few little jobs and the finishing touches. We'll have her finished with time to spare."

It had been a sales talk. Messick had tried to sound optimistic and sure of himself but somehow he had failed. Hillman sensed the doubt and the worry that was in the man, and somehow he felt sorry, knowing Messick was fighting a fight too big for him. But before Hillman could comment, he heard footsteps behind him and turned to face a tall man with a handful of pencils in his shirt pocket and dressed like a surveyor.

Joseph Messick said, "This is Stephen Thorn, our engineer."

Thorn held out his hand. "How do you do?" He had a sharp, angular face, burned almost black by the desert sun.

The voice hit Hillman like a blow in the solar plexus. Somehow he managed a smile. "Better, thanks. And you?" Thorn's steel-grey eyes were keen and piercing. His voice was the same one that had helped Leo Weyand urge Guy Davis on the night before. Here also was the man Leo Weyand had said he, Hillman, wouldn't like any better than he would like Joseph Messick. It was quite possible that there was no connection between Thorn and the freighter. Still—

THE morning went by smoothly enough. Stephen Thorn was congenial and did everything he could to let Hillman favor his foot. Despite this, however, it was throbbing sore when noon time rolled around.

While waiting for Mary and the horses, Hillman had his look at the vats. They held five thousand gallons each and were nearly half full by then. The water was squirting out through several cracks between the wooden staves but in only a day or two the wood would soak up enough water to close these. He went through the rest of the plant and found nothing amiss; and wondered if maybe Old J. B. Appleton was having nightmares after all.

It wasn't until the middle of the afternoon that he got his answer. He was writing the elevation on top of a cement pier with a piece of red keel when he heard Stephen Thorn grunt. Hillman raised his head to find the engineer with his back to the transit, looking toward the five leeching vats.

Clyde Hillman looked, too, and his thin lips pressed themselves in a straight line. His brown eyes grew narrow and he swore softly to himself. The water was still streaming out at the bottom of the vats but it had been turned off at the top. A group of workmen stood by, watching. Something was wrong here; something Clyde Hillman did not understand.

He laid his leveling rod against the pier and thought bitterly, *this then is another one of those things.* He moved carefully over to where the engineer stood, flinching with every step he took.

"What do you make of it, Thorn?" he asked cautiously.

"What do I make of it?" The engineer whirled, his voice and his face red with anger. "The floor has settled, that's what I make of it! Only a fool would have put in the cement that way in the first place. I told Messick it wouldn't hold its own weight! I told him we had to go down to bedrock but he's like a stubborn old

woman—he won't listen to anything. He said it was better to get it finished! Even if it didn't last, Old J. B. could put it in again cheaper than he could pay the penalty clause on an extended contract." Stephen Thorn whirled again and started toward the mill. "It'll take a month to tear out the cement and put it in again!"

Clyde Hillman followed along as rapidly as he could, weighing what he had learned and finding it bitter indeed. This didn't sound like the J. B. Appleton Construction Company at all. Old J. B. had always insisted on doing a thing right the first time, the hell with the cost. A contractor's reputation is based upon his past work. As soon as it starts going to pieces, he starts losing contracts regardless of his bid, or else they put so many inspectors on his job he can't even blow his nose without one of them watching to see how he does it.

Either Old J. B. had picked a wrong man in Joseph Messick or there was something here that didn't show on the surface.

HILLMAN drew closer and could make out the cracks forming in the face of the cement-retaining wall. His experience told him that the cracks probably would go also across the floor on top where the leaching vats stood. Two of the vats already leaned slightly out of plumb.

As he came up all talking stopped. The men turned to face him as a single man, a challenging defiance written on their faces. He had to smile to himself at how completely his ruse of posing as a rodman had failed.

Then a workman touched him on the arm and said, "Messick wants to see you in his office."

Quickly Hillman's eyes searched the faces about him. Stephen Thorn was not there and Hillman moved on toward the tarpaper shack, sensing the workmen's hostility as they silently moved aside to let him pass. None of them followed him down the hill.

He pulled the screen door toward him and went inside. Joseph Messick met him in the center of the room, more sullen and defiant even than the workmen had been. "Well?" He sneered. "What's J. B.'s little office boy going to do about this?"

Clyde Hillman bit down the anger coming up inside of him. Joseph Messick was acting like a kid and right then Hillman would have traded his trip to San Francisco for a good left leg. He would have enjoyed nothing quite as much as kicking Joseph Messick's hind-end from there to Elko and back again.

He let his eyes move around the half-gloom of the room before he answered. Stephen Thorn stood to one side of Messick, his eyes narrow and watchful. Guy Davis was sitting with his chair leaning back against the wall. Even his careless whittling on a cedar stick didn't hide the coiled-steel tenseness in his tough body.

As Clyde Hillman stood taking things in, the door opened again. Freighter Leo Weyand came inside and Joseph Messick turned toward him. "No one invited you in, Weyand. You can go back out. You, too, Davis."

Hillman watched Weyand's whisker-covered face break into a careless grin. "It's okay, Joe. I just want to see what makes him tick." His head indicated the trouble-shooter but his eyes never left Messick's face.

Guy Davis didn't move except to cut another time at the cedar limb.

After a long moment, Messick's eyes left the freighter's face and came back to Hillman's again, more sullen now than ever.

Hillman spoke then as though there had been no interruption since Messick's first question. "The real question, Messick, is—what are you going to do about it?"

"Do? There's only one thing to do. Rip it out and put it in right. I was a fool for—"

"It's all we can do, Hillman," Stephen Thorn cut in.

"The hell it is!" Clyde Hillman was really mad now. "You can drill holes every three feet through the cement! You can pump grout into the holes to keep the

floor from settling any more. You can even raise it up where it has already settled! You can dig down the face to bedrock and slap in a triangle block of cement reaching to the top of the wall. That'll hold your vats until hell freezes over!" His anger forced the words out fast and clear, leaving no trace of doubt in them.

THERE was a sharp silence before Joseph Messick said in a puzzled voice as though he didn't understand the word, "Grout?"

"Sure. Mix cement with sand in a thin paste. You can pump it into the smallest cracks."

Then Stephen Thorn said quickly, too quickly, Hillman thought, "You're crazy, Hillman. They tried the same thing on a stamp mill down in Tonopah. The thing shook to pieces in two weeks."

Hillman interrupted.

"This wall doesn't have to hold any stamps; it holds the vats. There will be vibrations of course but as long as the stamps aren't setting right on top of it, it will hold just like I say it will." Then a suspicion hit him and he faced the construction boss once more. "You did go down to bedrock for the stamps, didn't you?"

Messick nodded, his face still showing his uncertainty.

Then Stephen Thorn was talking again. "You can do anything you like, Messick, but I still say it won't work. It will just be throwing good money after bad and you'll have to tear it out in the end and do it all over again. Just as well to do it right in the first place."

Joseph Messick turned with a suspicious anger toward the engineer. "I thought you were the one who was so anxious to get it finished in order to cancel the penalty clause? Only a week ago you said it was better not to try to hit bedrock because it would take too long! You said—"

Hillman saw the slow color come up Thorn's neck to his face, as Messick revealed the lie Thorn had told Hillman only minutes before. Hillman saw the engineer's eyes jerk guiltily away and back again.

Now Clyde Hillman was satisfied. Joseph Messick and Stephen Thorn had fallen into their proper places. Things were shaping up.

He reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a ten-ounce plumb bob. Holding it by the end of the twine, he let it hang down the side of his leg until the bob almost touched the floor.

Messick was saying, "I'm almost starting to think you're behind a lot of the trouble we've been having, Thorn. Every time I've taken your advice something—"

Stephen Thorn's face was a deep red but with an anger now. "I don't give a damn what you believe, Messick! No man can accuse me of such things just to save his own face. Draw your gun, damn you!" Thorn's right hand streaked toward the shoulder holster bulging beneath his shirt.

ON the surface this was all very foolish. Joseph Messick didn't have a gun. There was none on his hip and his overalls and shirt were too tight-fitting to conceal a hide-out.

But Clyde Hillman knew this game wasn't being dealt on the surface. The cards were coming off the bottom. Maybe Thorn hoped to claim self-defense, and maybe—

Thorn's left side was toward him. He saw the engineer's right hand go for the gun, saw Thorn's eyes leave Joseph Messick's face for his own. Then he knew Thorn's bullet had never been intended for Messick's body at all, but for his own, Hillman's. Then he saw Thorn's hand close over the gun butt.

Clyde swung the plumb bob, still holding the end of the twine. Stephen Thorn jerked at his gun as though it had caught on his shirt.

Then Clyde let go of the twine and threw himself to the floor. He heard the sharp crack of the bob striking Thorn behind the ear. In almost the same instant Stephen Thorn's .38 crashed deafeningly. The bullet was a hot breath against Hillman's cheek where it missed him by

inches. Even before the engineer's gun reached the floor, Clyde Hillman was twisting toward it. He caught the sound of a gun behind him and saw the strange, disbelief cross Joseph Messick's face. Blood was already spreading over the construction boss's shirt front and Clyde Hillman knew that Leo Weyand had joined in.

Hillman twisted again, snatching for Thorn's .38 with his left hand. His fingers closed over the handle. Then a boot-heel came down on his hand, grinding the bone.

He cried out, half in hurt and half in anger. His right hand shot forward and his fingers closed around a dirty overall leg. He twisted, jerked. There was a startled oath and a building-shaking thud as Leo Weyand's huge body crashed to the floor. Thorn's .38 spun across the floor into a darkened corner.

Clyde Hillman felt a moment of panic as his hands made a desperate, fumbling search over the rough, native-lumber flooring. He knew now that this was the finish and realized only too well the escape-proof odds he fought. If Weyand and Thorn and Guy Davis didn't kill him first, they would simply swear he had killed Joseph Messick in cold blood. They would invite the construction workers and the miners to a necktie party with Clyde Hillman as featured guest.

They would—

As Hillman's fingers found the end of the twine, he saw Joseph Messick twist and try to get to his feet and he knew then that the construction boss was not dead. There was hope in this, a strange, desperate hope that somehow added stamina and power to Clyde Hillman's body.

He swung his eyes back to Leo Weyand. The freighter had just found his .41 revolver from where he had dropped it when he fell, and was bringing it up off the floor. His bright little eyes were hate-filled. They never left Clyde Hillman's face.

Hillman tugged at the twine and felt the weight on the other end. He pulled at it, starting it in a great swinging motion. The plumb bob went around once, gaining speed slowly. Leo Weyand saw it coming and threw up his hand to cover his face. The weight struck his wrist with a sharp sound and the .41 spun out of his hand. The freighter cursed and started crawling away on his hands and knees.

CLYDE HILLMAN started another swing. His eyes came up and he saw Joseph Messick stagger to his feet, saw Guy Davis come up behind him with a chair raised over his head.

Hillman cried out his warning, putting weight and speed into his swing. The plumb bob came around fast and hard. Like a rattler uncoiling, the weight left its orbit, twisting, turning. It passed Messick's head by inches and went between Guy Davis' up-raised arms. It caught Davis just above the right eye with a sudden, sickening thud, smashing him backward. He tore out a section of the wall as he crashed through it, ending up in a heap of tar-paper and splintered boards.

The chair falling from Davis' hands struck Messick on the head and shoulder. As Clyde Hillman turned back to Weyand, he saw the construction boss stagger and look around with a stunned disbelief on his face. Then Hillman saw Weyand came up on his knees, his .41 once more in his hand.

Already the trouble-shooter was moving toward him. He didn't have time for fear or for any thought. He had time only to keep his legs pumping, to keep moving, to keep trying to reach Weyand before the freighter could let go with another shot. He almost made it. Then almost in his face he saw the orange-red flash. He heard the crash and felt the bullet smash into his chest almost at the same moment.

His momentum carried him on, staggering, crashing into the crouching freighter.

He felt the freighter give before him, heard Weyand's head smash against the cast-iron stove in the corner. Then his own body struck the stove and it went

over, its sounds screaming their protests.

All this Clyde Hillman heard and felt without understanding.

He didn't even understand the agonizing hurt in his chest, the stunned emptiness, the desperate need for air, or the blackness that kept coming up around him in waves.

The second time in as many days Clyde Hillman opened his eyes to find a soft hand on his shoulder. He managed a faint smile and got Mary Messick's smile in return. Then from a long way off he heard the doctor say, "You weren't so lucky this time, my boy. You won't walk out of here tomorrow to finish some job you've got to do."

"He won't have to, Doctor," Joseph Messick spoke from somewhere behind Hillman. "He's finished his job. We'll finish the mill, too, by the first. I reckon the construction crew finished Weyand, Thorn and Davis as far as these parts are concerned. They ran them out of town on a rail with no uncertain promises as to what will happen if they ever dare come back. They figured on killing two birds with one stone, those three—and they damn near did it, too. Weyand wanted to keep the mill from being completed so he could keep his contract, hauling the ore to the railroad. With the mill leaching out the ore first he would get only a fraction of what he was used to hauling. And Stephen Thorn and Guy Davis wanted to break Old J. B. Engineer Thorn has wanted to be a contractor for some time but Old J. B. always gets the job with a lower bid. Davis was looking for a construction boss job like mine. A hard combination to beat, those three—a combination that had me stumped until Hillman came along."

Clyde Hillman didn't hear any more. It would be some time now before he would be making his scheduled trip to San Francisco. Then he had a thought that made him smile. It wouldn't be a bad idea at all, he thought, to take Mary Messick to San Francisco with him—a honeymoon so to speak.

He reached up to his shoulder and found her hand. And the more he thought about the idea, the better he liked it.

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ORNERY REDSKINS

By WILL NICHOLS

LIKE all primitive peoples, the American Indians, while in externals following a life of free simplicities, led a spiritual life hemmed and guided by a complexity of taboos and superstitions, in which other-world powers were to be constantly heeded and placated.

Great store was put by the significance of dreams. One curious result of this particular spiritual observance was the existence in some tribes, especially among the Cheyennes, of a class of men who were called Contraries, or Clowns. They were those who, in a dream, had seen the awsome Thunder, who was one of the most powerful of all the deities controlling the destinies of the red man. To dream of the Thunder meant that thereafter the dreamer—or Contrary—must live a life apart from his fellows and be different from them in all matters. He must live alone, dress himself in old and tattered clothing. He must place weeds in his hair instead of feathers. Sometimes he had to paint himself white from head to foot.

Since the dream meant that he was called upon to do penance, the Contrary had to do that which was one of the hardest things in life for any Indian to endure: appear ridiculous in the eyes of the other members of his tribe. The fantistic actions his deity called upon him to perform made him the laughing-stock and an object of cruel mockery to all his fellow tribesmen—with the exception of the ancient wisemen of the tribe, who understood—for he had gone to them for advice after his dream—but who were bound not to explain to the others the mystic cause of his strange behavior.

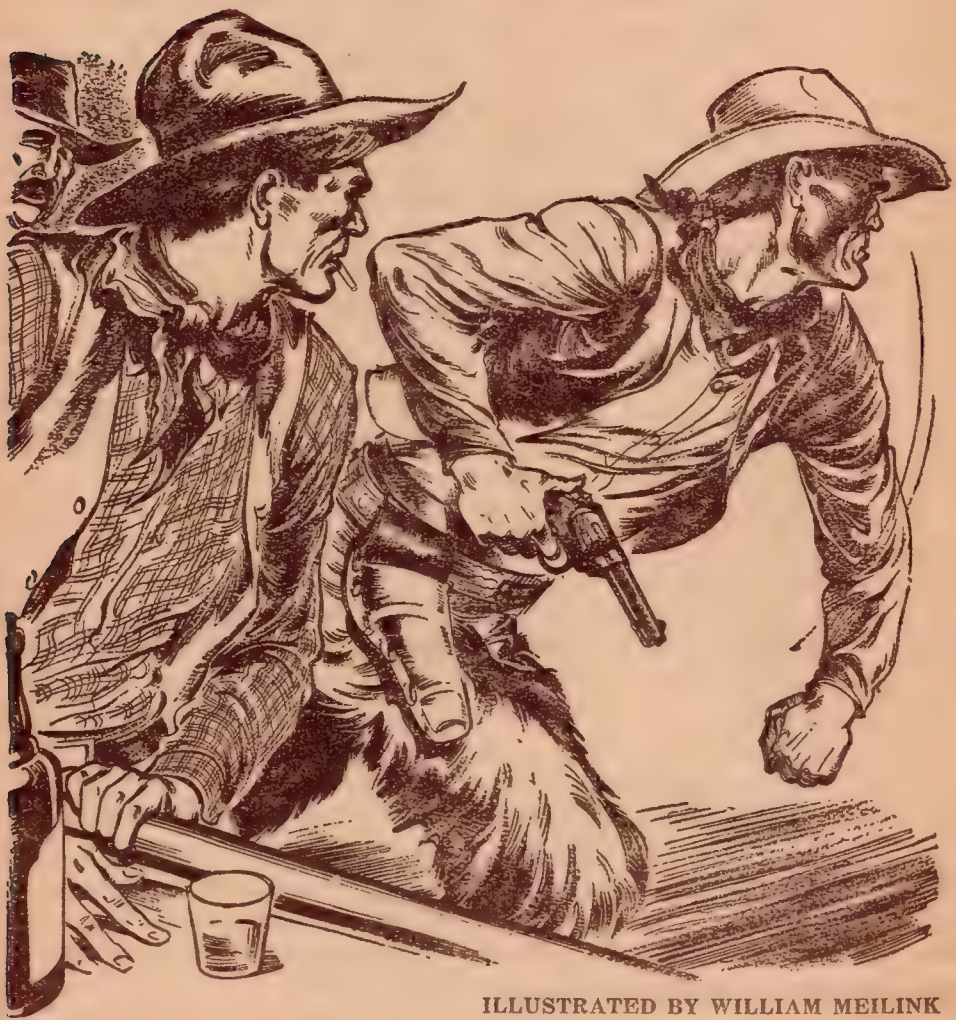
Everything a Contrary did he had to do in reverse—or contrary. If he were told by anybody to do something, it behooved him to do exactly the opposite. (Which was certainly a sound and practical reason for him to keep as much apart from others as he possibly could.) A Contrary to the Cheyennes was known as *Hohnukhe*, and among the Sioux he was called *Heyoka*.

Contraries were equipped with a sacred weapon known as a Thunder-Bow. It was a sort of combination bow and spear, with two bow-strings and with a spearhead at one end. There was one exception to the rule that a Contrary must be different from his fellows in all things, and this was that in battle he could join in and fight like any other brave. If, in battle, the Contrary should happen to lose his Thunder-Bow—and lose it fairly—it meant that his penance was over and that from then on he could behave like anybody else.

As a result, a Contrary, eager to revert to normal, would hurl himself into the thick of any battle, hoping to be deprived honorably of his Thunder-Bow. The fact that he stood a good chance of thereby being also deprived of his life was small consideration, for, to a Contrary, life just wasn't any fun at all.

Jim Jackson had repped for the worst lot of murderous rustlers and thieves on many a distant spread but this was different—yet not different enough to mean that Jim could cross this outlaw without bringing death by a mad

STAMPEDE!



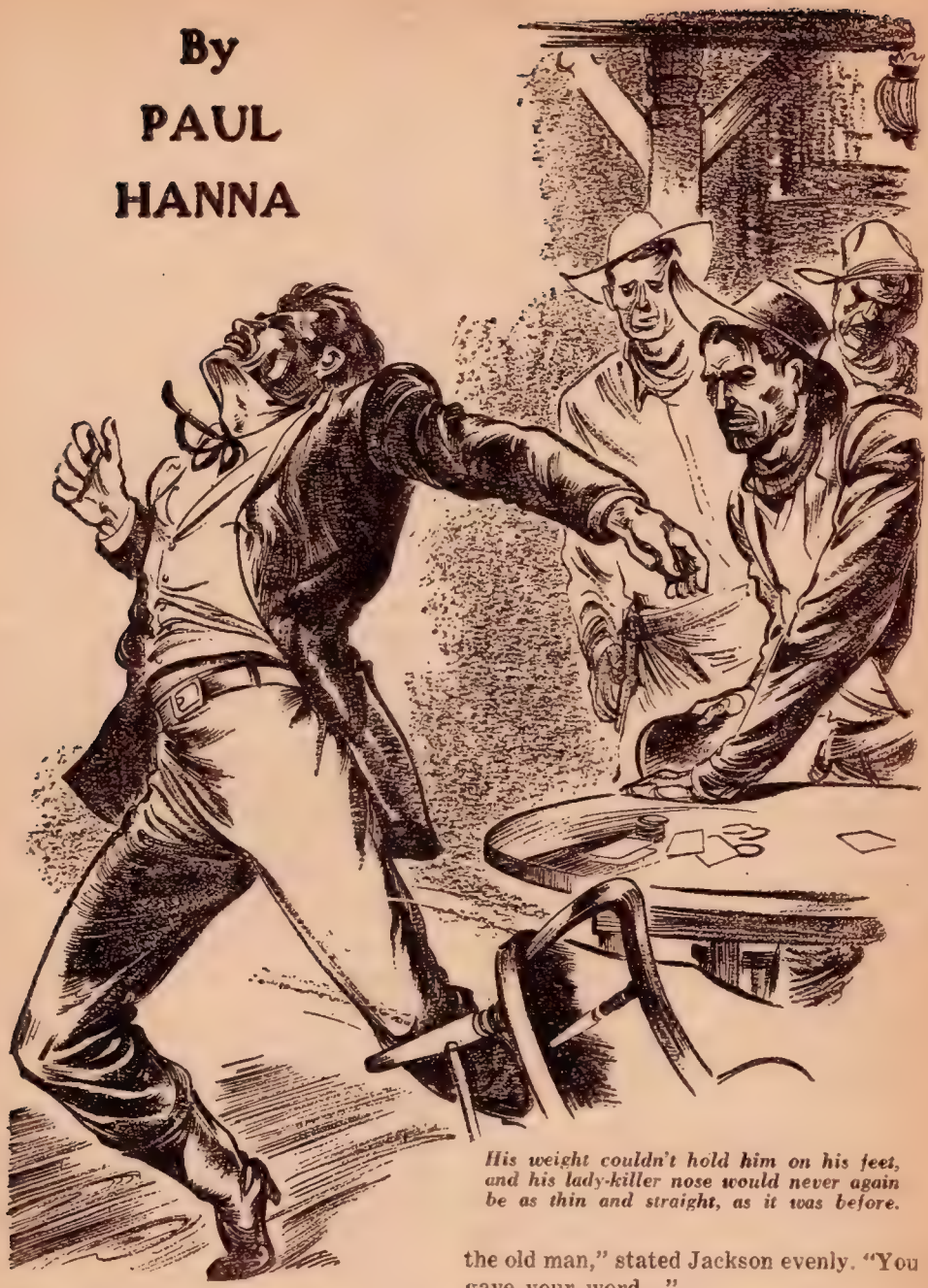
ILLUSTRATED BY WILLIAM MEILINK

KNOCKING the glass of redeye out of young Clint Harden's hand was the worst move Jim Jackson could have made. But this was the fifth swig that Clint had been about to down.

Loose-jointed and as gangling as some overgrown button, Jim Jackson took the width of the saloon in three long strides to hit that whiskey glass.

"What's the idea?" demanded Clint Harden angrily, his good-looking face reddening and his coal-black eyes snap-

By
PAUL
HANNA



His weight couldn't hold him on his feet, and his lady-killer nose would never again be as thin and straight, as it was before.

ping fiercely at Jackson's head.

Clint was as big as Jackson, tall and better knit together. Where Jackson appeared to be a rather clumsy lout of a cowpoke in his flopping bearskin chaps, Clint showed the probable quickness of his more compact body.

"It's nigh about time we were meetin' the old man," stated Jackson evenly. "You gave your word—"

A hand caught Jackson's shoulder, bringing him around.

"You keep your hands to yourself in my place, you brain-bound bronc-stomper!" rasped out Dude Crater, tinhorn gambler who lately had come into ownership of the *Red Ace Saloon*. "Have another one, Clint, and bring the bottle

along for our little game."

Dude wore the kind of duds that gave him his monicker. Like all others in the hodge-podge town of Lander, Jackson knew of the Dude's reputed quickness with the derringer under the arm of his fancy vest.

And the Dude's clever, long-fingered hand had moved to within inches of the hidden gun. Maybe it was because his own big nose had been busted and stayed crooked, but suddenly Jackson didn't like the Dude's nose, so straight and thin above his neatly trimmed mustache.

Dude made his grab for the derringer and he was fast. But he couldn't beat lightning wrapped up in a loosely coupled arm and a hard-boned fist.

Dude Crater was a good hunk of man himself but his weight couldn't hold him on his feet, and his lady-killer nose would never again be thin and straight. Jackson had dropped him with his left knuckles, and his single Colt was in his right hand as Dude shook blood drops from his mustache and smartly stayed his hand after his fingers had gripped his derringer.

"Dammit, Jim!" exclaimed Clint Harden, partly sobered. "Now you better get out pronto!"

Jackson didn't have any notion that he could linger around in the *Red Ace*, because several hard-eyed, gun-hung gents were shifting their feet and only waiting for a safe opening to side their boss. It wasn't yet a good bet with Jackson's worn-butted .45 weaving just enough to make uncertain where he might start smoking.

"All right, Clint," said Jackson, his angular face telling plain enough that he was unworried as to which hired gunslick opened the death pot. "You'd best come along. The old man'll be worrying."

It was in Jackson's mind that he'd put himself in a tight spot where he didn't hold the cards to stay and couldn't bluff his way out.

Murder showed in Dude Crater's pale blue eyes.

"I don't want to drill you, Dude," said Jackson slowly. "I'm askin' Clint to go along with me and no matter who thinks he's lucky, I'll sure enough put a new color on your fancy vest."

Dude kept his hands clear, getting slowly to his feet.

If Clint Harden hadn't been fired by too many drinks he might have heeded Jackson's words. Clint was a wild one because Pete Harden, his dad, had given him too much rein and too much dinero for his age.

Even so, Jackson had been with the T-in-Box long enough to believe that Clint had a downright decent streak and Jackson was smart enough to know that old Pete had spoiled Clint as a button and knew it. But that old Pete, tough and ornery toward all others, still hoped for Clint's wildness to run itself out.

That was a funny slant for Jim Jackson's thinking, and while he was but twenty, the cowpuncher who always picked his beast from the wild string should have been the last one to give two hoots in hades about Clint Harden and his old man.

Yet Jackson at this moment was soft enough inside to be about to bring Clint out of the *Red Ace* in a sudden roll of gunsmoke.

IT was one of those static moments when a quick move or a word would have afforded a reason for new digging on boothill. The eyes of every man in the saloon were centered upon Jim Jackson and the steadiness of his gun.

If ever a locoed hombre held a winning fistful of lead, it was this loose-jointed puncher whose slitted eyes must have looked to all the others like chips of granite.

There was a change, so sudden, so quiet and so inexplicable as to bring muttered oaths through the room.

Jackson let his long arm drop, sliding his gun back into its leather. His eyes had changed their direction, taking in the partly open door of the gambling room at the back of the saloon.

The quick orbs of Dude Crater had been cocked toward that same doorway. Perhaps only Jackson and Dude saw the

scarred long face of the man who appeared momentarily, and the lifted hand of the scar-faced man making a silent gesture.

Clint Harden gulped with the others when Jim Jackson's loose shoulders sagged and he ended his first and gun rampage by turning and shambling awkwardly on his high heels toward the street batwings.

There would have been gunsmoke then and Jackson wouldn't have walked out alive if Dude Crater's voice hadn't cracked out: "Hold it! There'll be no shooting!"

Dude himself had his deadly derringer commanding the room and he could have back-shot Jim Jackson.

But Jackson went out, glancing back just once in time to see Clint Harden and Dude Crater walking beside each other toward the cardroom door.

Jackson straightened his shoulders a little as he started along the planks of Lander's single street. His wide mouth worked as he muttered what was in his mind.

"I should've known that Whip Castro would be teamed up with a hellish, thievin' ranahan like the Dude. Maybe I was getting a lick o' sense but it's more likely I've had notions that'll put my neck in a hangrope."

Jackson reached the livery stable where his beast had been put up. Glancing up the slant of Lander's straggling street he could see the humps of Crook Range, a dozen hard miles away if he took the short-cut trails.

An October storm was brewing in the high mountain haze. Out of a drifting blackness could come either a cloudburst or an early Wyoming blizzard of freezing snow.

Judging the time as mid-afternoon, Jackson looked over at the general store. Tough old Pete Harden should be coming along any time now to meet him at the livery.

"And he was countin' on me to see that Clint didn't guzzle any redeye," said Jackson grimly. "Now Whip Castro will be raising hell aplenty, figurin' on me to be up there to cut fence on the first fall storm. Whip'll lay me out cold for being in town an' maybe messing up the whole deal on driftin' the T-in-Box shorthorns."

Another thought that he didn't utter hardened Jackson's bony face. He'd named Dude Crater a hellish, thieving ranahan. And he was wearing the same brand, had been ever since Whip Castro had picked him up when he was nothing but a sniveling button, crying over the way his mom and dad had been killed in that Montana landslide.

Jackson guessed he hadn't cried any real tears since that day. You didn't go soft when you rode with Whip Castro's rustling and robbing owlhooters.

OLD Pete Harden hadn't come from the general store. Jackson was standing in the mouth of an alley near the livery stable.

The man who came up the alley and stopped before he reached the street was runty in size, with a small but vicious face. He wore two guns that seemed to weight him down but he was as deadly with the sixes as with the knife he carried in the neck of his coat.

He was "Monk" Ross, Whip Castro's right-hand killer. Big Jim Jackson didn't change expression as Monk halted and spoke.

"Do you want to be toe-hung an' skinned, you dumb button?" Monk's voice scarcely more than whispered but it had a cutting edge. "Whip says you're to hightail back to that Harden meadow and he'll maybe give you a chance to explain how come you're in town and on the prod. There's a mountain snorter buildin' and we're all set for it."

"Yeah," said Jackson. "I knew Whip would be chawin' nails. I'm riding out, Monk, an' I'll cut it ahead of the storm."

An evil grin twisted Monk's wizened face.

"You'd better make it. Whip's changed the layout some. You're not to cut the canyon fence as you was supposed to. That's bein' taken care of. You're to hook up with Curly an' Choker. They'll slip into the meadow come dark and you'll

help start that herd hellin' down the canyon ahead of the storm."

Jackson stared at Monk.

"Who's cutting fence?"

"That doesn't matter. Whip says you're to ride the tail o' the stampede and he'll hash it out with you when we've got the beef across the line."

Monk gave a cackling laugh, turned and vanished in the alley.

Jim Jackson went into the stable and saddled his horse. He was standing outside when old Pete Harden came out of the store and crossed the street.

Old Pete was driving the buckboard. His brows were so thick and white they reminded Jackson of winter frost. But the eyes of old Pete were quick and sharp too.

"Is Clint in the stable, Jim?"

Old Pete's voice had sounded like rusty hinges when Jackson had hit the T-in-Box for a horse-wrangling job two months before. It seemed to have changed since then.

"Nope, Pete." The old man always insisted on being called by his first name, said it made him feel younger. "He'll be coming along. Guess he's still palaverin' with that new schoolma'am."

Old Pete's shrewd eyes twinkled and he grinned. Jackson could not have thought up a more pleasing lie.

"You wait for him, Jim, an' I'll be heading the wagon for home," said Pete. "It'll be early dark an' I want you and Clint should hightail straight for the mountain meadows. It's getting nippy an' I don't like the way the humps are foggin' up."

"Yup, Pete. Reckon we should've fetched the herd down to valley pasture sooner. That young beef put on good weight off the late stand of grama grass but if it starts blizzardin', the wild two- an' three-year-olds might break and run off all their fat."

Old Pete wet a finger and stuck it up.

"Norther making sure, Jim. Riley's got only six boys to hold the herd on bed ground in a bad blow. If the critters stampeded, it could bust that canyon fence 'fore they could be headed into the home trail. Dang Clint and his sparkin'."

Old Pete was pulling on his gloves.

"I'd rather have him shinin' up to that schoolma'am though than busting his promise."

JACKSON didn't miss the hope in old Pete's tone. It made him hate himself inside. He cast his eyes toward the *Red Ace* with the quick wish that Clint wouldn't have tied his big horse, Blacky, at the street hitch rail.

Old Pete put his hand upon Jackson's hard arm.

"You know, Jim, I owe you a heap. Clint's changed a lot since he's taken to you an' since he cottoned to the schoolma'am. I think he's through scatterin' his wild oats."

Jackson managed a short laugh that sort of choked him.

"All your debt's to that redheaded schoolma'am, Pete. She's all-fired pretty."

"Maybe so," said old Pete. "But all the same I figure you're nigh Clint's age an' you've kind of took him out of the wild string the same as you gentle a tough bronc. I won't be forgettin' it, Jim."

Jim Jackson wished right then that he could let go and cuss himself total and complete for what he really was. Whip Castro had made him an owlhooter from the time he had been a kid.

Old Pete's frost-rimmed eyes had something for him that he guessed he'd been missing most of his life. But it was something he couldn't keep.

No. Jim Jackson was on the Harden T-in-Box, repping for Whip Castro's murderous rustlers and thieves as he had repped for them on other distant spreads where prime herds could be run off.

It was too late to change his life now. Even if he had the guts to cross up Whip Castro, that ruthless outlaw would set the dogs of the law upon him.

One way or another it would be as tough for old Pete to find out the truth. And now, today, Jim hadn't so much as kept Clint off the redeye or out of Dude Crater's gambling hole.

"Maybe, Pete, you'd better be mosey-

in along," said Jackson. "The wagon trail can drift in fast if it comes on to blow. I'll pick up Clint and hit the short trails."

"Yup," growled old Pete. "But you needn't worry about an ornery old coot like me. I'm too tough to kill off easy an' I'm aiming to be around when Clint an' you are hitched to women and raisin' some grandchildren for me."

Old Pete laughed and poked Jackson's ribs. He couldn't have hit the cowpuncher harder with a .45 bullet close up. Including him, Jim Jackson, in a thought that seemed to make him one of Pete's own.

Jackson didn't have to reply and for that he was grateful. He knew then he'd rather be dead than be around to see old Pete when the truth came to him.

A HORSE appeared with a bolting run from beyond the *Red Ace Saloon*. Clint Harden was in the saddle and he had Blacky on the dead run.

Clint was straight in the saddle but his eyes were fixed ahead. He didn't see either old Pete or Jackson as the big gelding raced up the street.

Jackson was chilled. But old Pete took Clint's fast departure from Lander in another way and he chuckled over it.

"I bet you he had a spat with that schoolma'am," said old Pete. "Clint's too danged quick on the trigger an' that girl's redheaded."

"Yeah." Jackson tried to make his grin look right. "I'll take out after him, Pete. My sorrel can cut down his horse any day."

Jackson went into his saddle.

"Take him to the meadow, Jim!" called out old Pete. "An' look out for yourself on those short trails!"

Old Pete was striding toward the buckboard as Jackson put his heels to the rough-coated sorrel.

He cussed then, damned himself for what he was, over the first rough mile of the short-cut trail toward Crook Range meadow.

"Look out for yourself, he says," muttered Jackson. "Aims to be around when Clint an' I are raisin' his grandchildren. It'd be doin' me and old Pete a favor if I took a fall an' broke my damn' neck."

Because it was the first blast of a real snorter that broke when Jackson was but halfway to the T-in-Box mountain meadow, he failed to make good his boast of overtaking Clint Harden. That Blacky horse could run and the flying dry snow that was only a hint of the coming blizzard blotted out all chance of sighting Clint before crossing over the home trail gap into the shorthorn holding grounds.

Jackson had quit cussing and was huddled against the cold that cut to the bone, as he rode through the pass and made out the first shadowy riders of the T-in-Box. That dozen miles had been tough going and under Crook Range was only a blank swirl of snow and darkness.

The owlhoot puncher circled wide of the dimly seen riders. He made out that Riley, the ramrod, had been smart enough to bed down the young cattle before the storm struck. It was a wide and partly sheltered mountain range.

There were more than two thousand of the twos and threes, a fair fortune on a good fall market. And Whip Castro's wild ones were set to collect all of it.

Riding cautiously and breathing his sorrel, Jackson debated about chancing a visit to the chuck wagon for a hot drink.

"Curly and Choker?" Jackson clamped his teeth. "The worst pair in Whip Castro's bunch. They'd as soon back-shoot some of the Harden riders an' most likely will."

Fine snow was like shot driving into Jackson's eyes. The wind screamed but his ears were keened for shooting. There would have to be gunfire, ripping lead to stir up the bedded herd.

Once spooked and drifted into the increasing snorter howling over Crook Range, the T-in-Box cows would instinctively stampede, tails to the wind. The drift would take the herd down upon the canyon trail where it had been fenced off.

"Riley and the boys can't turn 'em toward the gap of the home trail once they're running," grated Jackson. "An'

after seeing me in town, Whip's havin' one of his other ranahans cut that fence—"

HIS own words pulled Jackson up short. He had asked Monk who was supposed to cut fence and he hadn't been answered. It came to him now with the impact of a bullet.

"Whip's hooked up with Dude Crater. They've been spotting me with Clint, an' maybe Whip doesn't trust me. But they have to have some hombre that knows that canyon and the likeliest spot for cuttin'. That means—"

Jackson didn't finish his thought in words.

Guns cracked. They sounded faintly in the screaming wind. But there was a steady popping as if at least half a dozen sixes had cut loose at once.

Jackson could see the dim shapes of bedded steers beginning to move. Then a horse came past, running on the wind, looking like a white ghost. Its saddle was empty.

Jackson cussed low and bitterly. He reined his sorrel down the meadow slope toward the canyon. That put his back to the push of the blizzard that was rising as it came over the humps of the range.

The big herd had started to move slowly, milling at first. Jackson's sorrel was on clear ground, and it was becoming rougher. The puncher had studied every foot of the big meadow, the canyon, and the gap into the badlands where Whip Castro could easily cut the stampeding herd across the state line.

The wailing of the wind was not strong enough now to cover the continued gunfire and the thundering of the herd as it moved faster.

Jackson rode into what was almost a calm space under the range cliff and he knew he was only yards from the barbed wire of the fence. He reined the sorrel under the cliff and tied him to a sumach.

"Maybe I'm wrong," he said slowly. "But if I'm guessin' straight, there's but one answer."

He took another six-gun and a pair of wire-cutters from his saddlebag. He touched the barbed line of wire and moved toward the center of the ten-panel fence.

"I guess I'm no different from any other yellow belly when it comes to dyin'," Jackson's voice was low, choked. "But seeing it has to be, it could be that old Pete would never have known about—"

His musing ceased. From up the canyon meadow came the rolling rumble of the oncoming herd. And just ahead of him, a vague figure in the snow blink, the fence cutter was at work.

Jackson crouched low, stalking the other man. He passed two fence panels already cut. He was upon the wire-cutter then, jumping with all the power of his long legs and slamming his own cutter upon the other man's skull.

He hadn't time to feel for the fallen man's pulse. He picked up Clint Harden and staggered with him to the shelter of the cliff. Clint's pulse was strong but Jackson was sure he would be out for some time.

Following its first blast the mountain snorter quieted in a lull that Jackson knew presaged another stronger burst. The cowpuncher found Clint's horse Blacky, with the Winchester repeater in the saddle boot.

"A galoot like me can't die but once," said Jackson grimly, making sure the Winchester had a full magazine. "Riley's boys are holdin' up the herd, but there'll be no stoppin' it unless I play the hand that's been dealt me."

THE ground shook and rumbled now as Jackson reached the first cut panel of barbed wire. He could see gun flashes of three or four T-in-Box riders off to one side, attempting to check the stampede where the meadow narrowed into the canyon.

"They don't dare front them steers," reasoned Jackson. "And nothin' but a rain of lead in their faces will pile up the leaders and stop the panicked cows."

The storm was rising again. Jackson resisted the urge to flee from the line he could now see moving down upon him.

"I've got it figured out now," he muttered. "Whip Castro has more'n a dozen of his toughest owlhooters waitin' to trail in on the stampede when it passes. They'll hold on that flat shelf where they'll be safe from the cows, and it's off to the right."

The stampede was gathering momentum now, as if the T-in-Box riders had been forced to give up. Then, with the first crowding steers rolling toward him like a flooded stream, Jackson flattened himself in the deepest hole he could find.

None but a man believing death would be his only out could have acted as calmly as Jackson.

He had been warmed by his effort. Now his big hands started emptying three six-guns, his own and Clint's, into the faces of the plunging shorthorns but a few yards above him.

The stampede was so close that Jackson saw two or three of the herd leaders go down with lead in their brains. For seconds there was mad, bawling, piled confusion.

But the main herd was swinging, still coming.

"It'll have to be," grated Jackson. "And here's hopin' I can pay up for all the hellishness Whip Castro learnt me!"

Jim Jackson's flesh crawled as he expected the impact of cutting hooves weighted by tons of beef. But his big hands were steady upon the Winchester repeater as he triggered, pumped and triggered again and again.

He had to find the Whip Castro rustlers by the instinct that had imprinted every turn of the canyon upon his brain. He might have taken pride in his sureness when the guns of the owlhooters started exploding, returning his unexpected attack.

This was one angle Whip Castro could not have foreseen. An unseen rifleman was raking his ownhooters with high-calibre lead.

There was too much stampede thunder, too much shrieking of the blizzard for Jackson to hear the yelling curses of Castro's rustlers. But he had gained his point, although it lessened any chance he might have had to live.

Rifles and short guns were slamming lead up the canyon. The explosions could be heard and some gun flashes could be seen.

Jackson felt the hooves of a steer pound across his hips, numbing him. He kept his hands working. A line of deadly lead was seeking him, skirring from the hard ground.

He felt a bullet burn his shoulder. In this moment he had but one desperate hope. That an owlhoot bullet would find his brain and save him from the agony of dying under the hammering hooves of the cattle.

Jackson's mind was doubtless beyond any but the maddest thinking. All hope of possible survival was gone.

Two things happened simultaneously. A dying shorthorn came to its knees and rolled, its weight pinning Jackson in the hole from which he was shooting. And he triggered the last loaded shell in the rifle.

"Reckon it'll be over soon."

He was barely whispering. What had been grinding pain was changing to a paralysis over his big body, touching his mind. Yet he could see and understand enough to know that his ruse had succeeded.

Except for a few steers, the stampede had been turned.

The guns of Whip Castro's own owlhooters had piled up leaders of the herd along the canyon fence. Back of these the main body of the T-in-Box cows had begun milling, and Riley's riders were cutting through.

As the driving white blizzard became blackness, Jim Jackson whispered, "Old Pete'll never know."

JIM JACKSON floated back to life. The storm seemed to have stopped, which couldn't be of a mountain norther. It was all quiet, but the light of a swinging lantern was in Jackson's eyes.

He could see the bearded face of Riley and the hard eyes of other T-in-Box riders. He saw the frosty brows of old Pete. They had put him in the chuck

wagon and Riley was doing something to thick bandages around his shoulder.

Jackson had hoped for anything but this. His mind was suddenly terribly clear. They had found him at the cut fence.

Then he was talking, for he saw Clint Harden seated at the side of the wagon with a bandage around his head.

"Why didn't you string me up—finish it?" Jackson's voice was amazingly steady. "I got caught up when I cut the fence. It was like Whip Castro had planned—"

His voice went on and on. The silence was more awful than if old Pete had cursed him.

Jackson told it all. Then, "Clint caught me cutting wire an' knocked me out," he said. "He tried to save the herd. He—" Old Pete's eyes bore into him. The old man's lips moved out he didn't seem to find words.

"Pete had hoped you'd be a brother to Clint," said Riley, suddenly. "You aren't gonna be strung up. It'll be a long time before you walk, but Pete won't have you strung up. I guess Clint's shootin' started the fight with the rustlers, saved the herd. Pete'll just let you drift."

Old Pete looked at Jackson and there was no life in the old man's eyes. He was wiping an arm across his face, arising.

Clear and clean came sudden words from Clint Harden.

"Jim Jackson is lying—he's lying like sin to save me. It was *me* that cut that fence, and Jim started them owlhooters shooting. I owed Dude Crater gamblin' money and—"

Old Pete's shoulders straightened. His voice was at first like a grating, rusty hinge.

"None of you here can recollect ary thing you've heard," he said. "The one does answers to me personal."

Riley nodded and the other riders grunted assent.

Old Pete stood between Jim Jackson and Clint. His hard old hands reached out and touched each of them.

"I had a son and I come nigh losin' him to the devil," he said. "Clint, I'm more proud of you this minute than I've ever been. Damn the herd. It don't matter. . . . But me, I've got two sons."

His final words were as gentle as a benediction.

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Gabe Blows His Horn

(Continued from page 89)

Nobody made a move to stop Palmer. Everybody stared at Gabe, thinking he lost what little mind he had had. But Gabe was on his feet and lunging at the whirling horses. He got his fingers tangled in the flying mane. Palmer lashed out with a booted foot. Gabe exchanged his grip on the mane for one on the man's leg. He put his weight into a sharp, twisting pull and brought Palmer out of the saddle. Both men rolled in the dust, clawing for each other's throats.

Old Pete Lyddon and his deputies came to life then and pulled the two men apart.

"See here, you horn-tootin' fool!" the sheriff roared, "you can't jump a feller an' accuse him of being—"

"Look at his horse!" Gabe panted. "See the left flank? The hair's singed! One of those burnin' sheets of music settled on an outlaw's horse. I saw it. On the left flank! It was Sid Palmer's horse! Why don't you search him for a mask? Why don't you—"

Sid Palmer's hand streaked toward his gun but didn't quite make it, for a deputy lashed out with a gun barrel and Palmer folded up with a sick groan. The mask was tucked into the bottom of a saddle bag on the bay horse.

Almost before Gabe had time to recover his beloved cornet and discover that the only damage to the instrument was a small dent in the bell, the deputies and half a dozen men were on their way to round up Squat Bender and Rake Fitch at Palmer's ranch.

"No wonder Sid always had plenty of money to spend!" Charley Clump growled. "And all the time we thought he was just a smart rancher."

"There's some reward money coming yore way, Gabe." The sheriff grinned. "Enough and then some to buy another bass drum. But since I'm gonna play a drum, reckon I'll buy one of my own. Why, with me president and Gabe-blow-yore-horn the leader, we'll have the finest band in the state!"

It seemed that everyone felt the same way about it. At least everyone had a grin plastered on his face and looked pleased.

Gabe was grinning, too, but not at the sheriff or the crowd of Hopewell citizens. He was grinning at Sue Hilton, who stood beside Preacher Larson. Just seeing the two standing side by side was enough to make Gabriel-blow-yore-horn take a peek into the future. And it was a rosy future with a neat music store uptown and a small house under big shade trees at the edge of town. In the house, of course, would be a girl with honey-colored hair, cooking thick steaks and baking lemon pies just for Gabe. Also, he suspected it would be a big wedding. Big enough to fill Preacher Larson's church to overflowing.

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Double-Cross Finish

(Continued from page 71)

coach. The girl was its passenger again and with her was the excitable Mexican seaman. Jeff strode to the carriage.

"What's wrong, Jan?"

"Everything! Matt Brannon is betraying us!" the girl shouted. The Mexican seaman broke in, shouting in his own tongue. Jan managed to silence him with a rebuke in Spanish. Then she went on, "This is Pablo Gomez. He owns the fishing boat. He claims that Matt never paid him so much as a peso for its use. Matt put his own men aboard—put Pablo's crew ashore. He kept Pablo because he knows these waters. Pablo doesn't like Brannon and his men. He's afraid of them. He hid tonight when you and Matt Brannon had that fight—so he wouldn't have to go back to the boat."

As Jan paused, out of breath, Jeff asked, "How does that prove Brannon is crossing you up?"

"Pablo came and asked me for help to get his boat back," Jan said. "I questioned him and learned that Brannon had used his boat for the other shipment of mercury, Don't you see, Jeff? Brannon sent word that the boat and its cargo were seized by a Federal patrol vessel and that he saved himself by swimming for shore!"

Jeff didn't see and said as much.

Nichols broke in, "Gomez told Miss Bentley that Brannon put in at Monterey, where there was an English ship in the harbor. Brannon sold the mercury to the Britishers. It looks as though he'll try something like that with the mercury you just turned over to him. He's supposed to sail it to Mexico and turn it over to Confederate agents there—so they can freight it across to Texas and then to the Confederate arsenals. Brannon's a crook, all right!"

Nichols' calling another man a crook would have amused Jeff Randall under any other circumstances. Jeff was frowning now and said, "Brannon told me he was sailing for Mexico."

"Maybe he is," Nichols told him. "But that doesn't mean he'll turn the mercury over to the Confederate agents. The stuff is needed at the Mexican gold mines and he could sell it for a big price down there. The lady . . ." He jerked a nod in Jan's direction ". . . asked me, as a true Southerner, to help her deal with Brannon. But since you've left the boat, we must be too late."

"There's still a chance," Jeff said flatly. "Brannon didn't have all the mercury aboard when I left. And the boat wasn't ready to sail. We may be able to get to the cove before he shoves off!"

Jeff led the way. Nichols had ordered one of his bandits to turn his mount over to Jeff. They swung away at a gallop, leaving the carriage and its occupants behind.

The sky was turning pink-gray to the east, as the riders topped the hills horseshoeing the cove. Jeff reined in, gestured for the others to pull up.

At first he thought the boat had left the jetty and headed out to sea, for fog was rolling in and obscuring the water below. Then he saw the tip of the boat's mast protruding from the fog blanket. And heard a muffled voice. Matt Brannon was shouting orders. His men were unfurling the sails.

Jeff drew his gun, motioned to Nichols and his five bandits. They rode down the slope, into the swirling gray curtain of fog.

A warning cry lifted from the boat. The men behind Jeff were Confederate guerrillas, at least in their own minds. They let out the Rebel yell. They reached the beach and the loose wet sand slowed their horses. Jeff saw the dim outline of the fishing boat.

Brannon yelled, "Shove off! Cast off the lines!"

HE was too late. Jeff led his crowd past the mules still standing on the beach. He jerked his horse to a stop, dropped from the saddle, ran for the

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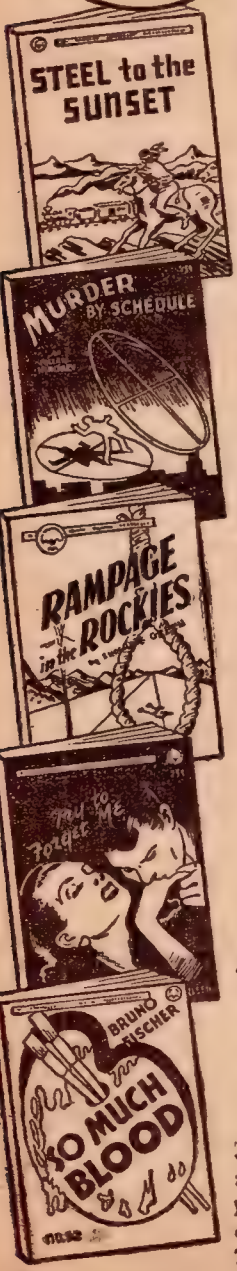

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jetty. Nichols and the others followed him.

Blurred shapes moved about the boat's deck. There was a foot of water between jetty and sloop, for the lines had been cut. Suddenly the grayness was speared with lances of powder-flame. Brannon and his crew were letting loose with rifles and six-shooters.

One of Nichols' men cried out, stumbled, fell. Another went down without a sound. The jetty was a trap and Jeff yelled, "Jump aboard! Close in on them!" He made the leap, hit the wet deck, slipped and went down. His fall saved him from a bullet for the seaman who had hit him with a bottle at the roadhouse fired at him. Jeff triggered his Colt as he lay sprawled, and the seaman, hit in the chest, fell over the side.

Jumping up, Jeff saw the guerrillas swarming aboard—shooting, giving the Rebel yell. They closed in on the crew, driving them toward the bow. Jeff saw a gun flash from a cabin porthole. He ran toward the companionway, leapt down it, crashed against the door. The lock held. A gun blasted within the cabin and the slug splintered through the door.

Jeff flung himself against the door again and this time it gave way. He was propelled inside. He saw Matt Brannon with gun held ready, there in the murky gloom. Brannon fired and missed. Jeff swung his Colt up, squeezed the trigger. It missed fire and panic caught hold of him. His next move was automatic. He flung the weapon at Brannon and lunged forward.

Brannon howled as the heavy gun crashed into his face. He reeled back against the cabin wall, firing another shot—this one into the deck.

Jeff reached him then and tore the gun from his hand. Brannon kneed him hard to the stomach, then drove a blow into his face. Jeff was knocked full across the cabin and fell to the deck. He lost Brannon's gun and had no time to retrieve it. The man came at him with his knife.

Jeff lurched up, jammed against Brannon's knees. Both men went down. Brannon rolled over, striking out. The knife point jabbed Jeff's thigh. They broke, both jumping up. Jeff backed away and Brannon, grinning in ugly fashion, stalked him.

Brannon leapt, knife aimed at Jeff's throat. But he used an over-hand thrust and Jeff caught hold of his arm. This time he used a knee to Brannon's groin. The man doubled over in agony and Jeff threw himself upon his bent back. He drove Brannon to the floor, heard him gasp, felt him grow strangely limp. Jeff rose and, gasping for breath, stared at his enemy in wonder. Matt Brannon didn't move. There was a widening pool of blood. Jeff bent and rolled Brannon over onto his back. The knife blade was sheathed in the man's body. It had entered through the ribs and must have reached the heart, for Matt Brannon was dead.

Faint light filtered into the cabin, through doorway and portholes, and Jeff saw a leather money pouch on the floor. He picked it up, heard the clink of gold coins and felt the roll of currency it held. This was the poke Brannon had shown him at La Posada and it certainly contained ten times the two hundred dollars Brannon had claimed. Jeff didn't care how Brannon had come by it; he was taking it in part payment of what had been stolen from him. Jeff retrieved his hat and gun, then went on deck. But there too the fighting was over.

BACK on deck, Jeff learned that only one of Brannon's crew had gotten away. He had escaped by jumping overboard and swimming across the cove. Captain Jack Nichols had had two men killed. Two others had slight wounds. The guerrilla leader was in a good humor, however, for he was a man who loved a fight. "I'd be back in Jeff Davis's army right now," he told Jeff Randall, "only too many lawmen are looking for me east of the Mississippi."

The Mexican youth hadn't been able to drive his carriage down to the cove, so he and his passengers descended the slope on foot. The owner of the fishing boat was still talking wildly, though now not even Jan Bentley listened. The

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guerrilla who had given up his horse to Jeff came with another man, covering the stranger with his gun. As they emerged from the denser fog, Jeff saw that the newcomer was little Herb Mitchell.

"We caught him riding along the road," the guerrilla said. "I figure he's a Yankee spy out on patrol. But the girl claims she knows him."

Herb was jumpy. He said, "It's not true!" in an off-key voice.

Jeff gave Jan a questioning look and she said, "Herb swears he isn't what we thought, Jeff." She took Jeff's arm and led him to one side. "I believe he's telling the truth. He says he followed us all the way from Carson because he was afraid something might happen to me. He thought that he could protect me. I think he . . . well, he thinks he's in love with me, Jeff."

"I can't blame him for that," Jeff told her, grinning. "And at least, we know what really happened to your last shipment of mercury. It wasn't seized by a patrol as it would have been if Herb was a Union agent." He sobered. "Now that Matt Brannon is dead, you'll need a new man to deliver the mercury to those Confederate agents in Mexico."

"I've been thinking of that," Jan said. "I've picked a man." She gave him a coquettish smile. "You, Jeff."

He frowned. "I was planning on getting a fresh start for myself," he said. "And on our getting married. Besides, I've never been out on the water in my life."

"You can get your fresh start when you come back," Jan said firmly. "I'll meet you in San Francisco as soon as you send me a telegram, and we'll be married. And it doesn't matter if you're not a sailor. Pablo Gomez will handle the boat. All you'll have to do is deliver the mercury when you reach Mexico."

"Pablo will need more than a one-man crew."

"Well, there's Herb. . . ."

That was the way of it, Jeff found. Because of a girl, he and little Herb Mitchell were shanghaied aboard Pablo Gomez's fishing boat, *La Santa Rosita.*

Their hands grew sore handling tarred ropes, and each pitch of the deck turned their landlubber stomachs over. And Pablo Gomez was a tyrant on the sea. But the fog was kind to smugglers and they eluded the Yankee patrols. The coast was long, Mexico far away. But Jeff Randall could content himself with knowing what awaited him on his return. In the meantime, he was helping the cause he believed in—and in wartime, a man had to do what was asked of him. The arsenals of the hard-pressed Confederacy were crying for mercury, and Jeff Randall would deliver it.

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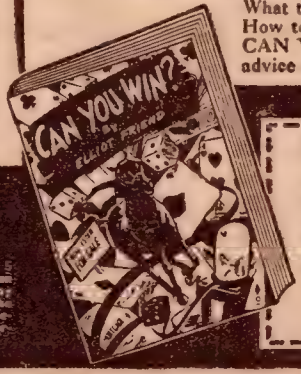

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Drifter's Trail

(Continued from page 95)

owner. They were head-shy and nervous and bad-tempered. This, to Neal, was evidence of bad handling, which meant a careless, arrogant man.

Thaleman followed him out to watch him hitch up the team. Neal had heard nothing good about the man. He mined a little, worked when he had to, speculated in cattle, gambled now and then and occasionally went to Los Angeles broke and came back well-heeled.

"I guess you're going to take Miss Curtwright and her pa for a ride, eh?" said Neal.

Thaleman grinned.

"You guessed wrong, kid. I heard you elected yourself her guardian angel. Well, I'm going to take the young lady out alone to show her some of my land holdings."

"You don't have any land holdings!"

Thaleman grinned again and said, "Why, kid, you know better than that! The daughter of one of the state's most influential cattlemen can't help but be interested in my vast estate."

He climbed into the buggy. Neal handed him up the lines. The blacks clattered out and around in front and Thaleman got down to help Frances up into the buggy. They spun away. Neal went slowly back into the barn.

IN a moment, Adam Curtwright came in. His face was ashen and he was holding his hands together to keep them from shaking.

"Did Palmer Thaleman take my girl out?" Neal nodded. "Why did you let them?" Curtwright wailed. "He's no good! If there's one man in California I wouldn't trust with her, it's him."

"Why did *you* let her?" Neal snarled at him.

"I—I couldn't help it! He knows too much and he'd have told her in a minute." His voice rose. "Don't stand there! Do something!"

Neal reached for his saddle, which hung on an extra peg just inside the door. There wasn't much choice in the nags for rent here but Jeb Larkin's bay gelding was a fine horse. And a man who had a black suit invested in this pretense would not quibble at the loan of his private horse.

Neal followed the tracks of the buggy. It had turned off the road in a little black-oak grove four miles out of town. When he rode up, they were standing on the ground. The girl was near the buggy, and Palmer Thaleman was standing beside her—too close, Neal thought. The man's face showed open anger when he recognized Neal, but Neal thought the girl was relieved.

"Your pa's been taken sick and you better go on home," Neal said. "You'll want to hurry, so you better take this horse. I'll ride back in the buggy."

He reassured her—her pa was not really bad, he said; he just wanted her to put wet rags on his forehead and talk, was about all. The girl looked at her skirts.

"But I can't ride this way!"

"Then get in the buggy. Mr. Thaleman won't mind if I drive, I reckon. Your pa said I was to hurry you back myself—that's what he said. 'Neal,' he told me, 'you drive that girl yourself!' "

"And I get to ride Larkin's horse, I suppose!" Thaleman said savagely.

"You'll find it purely a pleasure," Neal answered soberly. "He's a right good mount."

"You're too good to me!"

Thaleman swung up into the saddle and Neal wished the man had not acquiesced so readily. A man who knew when he was beaten, who could make up his mind that quickly—well, he could be dangerous.

"I trust your father is not seriously ill," Thaleman said.

He drove his heels into the bay's sides and thundered away. Neal found himself trembling unaccountably as he turned the blacks and followed Thaleman's dust.

The fat hotelman came shambling out to stutter, "Your pa got to feelin' better and he went away to look at some beeves. You come right inside and sit down."

The puzzled girl went up to her room. The hotelman turned to Neal.

"Old Curt took out right after you left and nobody seen where he went. He's gone off on a tear, that's what! If he gets tight—"

"Where'll I look for him? Quick!"

Thaleman had put the bay back in his stall and unsaddled him. Neal threw the saddle on again, laced it nervously—

HE found Adam Curtwright just as dark fell, and after he had circled miles out of town and back again. He was squatting between two small campfires in a little willow grove at the edge of Pinto. Across from him sat Palmer Thaleman. Between them was a quart bottle of whiskey. Thaleman was shuffling a deck of cards. He looked up and flashed a cold smile as Neal dismounted and tied the bay.

"Having a little friendly game?" Neal asked, walking over.

He squatted down. Thaleman offered the deck to Curtwright. Curtwright cut without looking.

"Deal me in," said Neal, finding a place where the firelight would illuminate his hand.

"We're playing for big stakes," said Thaleman. "Curt already owes me thirty-six thousand dollars. He's going to have to sell off a few thousand of those beeves of his." He yawned. "Ho-hum! On the other hand, if I'd lost, I'd have had to sell a few thousand acres. Drink, Curt?"

"No-no, thanks," said Curtwright, licking his lips.

"I'll put in my horses," said Neal. "Let's make it a *big* game. I've got three hundred and eighty head of the finest wild horses you ever saw. The only trouble is—I haven't laid hands on them yet. Yes, sir, I can four-flush with the best of you!"

Thaleman laid down his cards and spat on his hands and said, "I guess maybe you meant something else but it didn't

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sound like it," and got up on the balls of his feet.

"I guess maybe you heard me right the first time," said Neal, doggedly.

He started to get up as he said it and he was on one knee when Thaleman swung from a sitting position. The blow caught Neal on the mouth and he went over backward, with one arm in the fire. He yelled when his flesh burned, and kept on rolling.

Thaleman came down on top of him, stamping with his bootheel, and Neal caught two brutal licks on his hip and side before he could wrap his arms around Thaleman's legs and heave him over.

Thaleman fell on top of him, smashing out with both fists, and Neal got his foot in the big man's crotch and held on until his head cleared.

They got up together and Neal went in under Thaleman's guard and got in two good licks to the stomach. Thaleman stepped backward and Neal hit him again. Thaleman doubled over and Neal measured carefully as he cocked his right—

Stars exploded all around him as Thaleman's big fist smashed into his temple. He knew nothing then until he felt pebbles under his shoulder blades and could hear old Adam Curtwright pleading with him.

"You had him groggy, kid! You're fast as greased lightning! Don't quit now! Get up and lick him! You can't quit!"

Neal pushed against Curtwright's chest and snarled, "Who can't quit? She's your daughter and yet the first yellow fourflush that sticks a bottle under your nose—"

"Under whose nose?" Curtwright yelled. "You infernal whelp, I haven't had a drink since Francie got here!"

Neal stared at him and then at the bottle, and then he saw that there were only a couple of drinks gone from it. In close to Thaleman, he had smelled liquor, between blows. . . .

His hands curled into fists and he scuttled backward like a crab, as Thaleman leaped at him.

They clinched in the dark and Neal kept pumping away at Thaleman's wind, wondering how long his own body could stand the punishment. The grove reeled, and redness blotted out his vision, and he caught at a tree and waited for Thaleman to knock him down.

Then, after ages, his vision cleared and he saw Thaleman on the ground. The big man was switching slightly and clutching at his stomach. Adam Curtwright caught hold of Neal's arm and pulled him away. In a moment Neal got his wits back, and about the same time he heard Thaleman get up and stumble away toward town.

"Kid, what's this about wild horses?" Curtwright asked, shaking him.

Neal told him. It was hard to cut the herd down from three hundred and eighty to a mere thirty-odd, but the last thing he wanted to do was four-flush the way Palmer Thaleman had.

Curtwright nodded and rubbed his chin.

"So that's what Francie's been talking about! I wondered who gave her the crazy idea to go wild-horse hunting. Kid, we can't keep her fooled much longer. I'd rather tell her myself, up there in the Three Sisters, than have her find out here. The boys here in Pinto will stake us. Could the three of us trap that band?"

Neal felt himself going dizzy again at the prospect of being up in the hills behind that noble horse-herd, with Frances. He muttered, "You mean . . . *us?* You and me? Would . . . would Frances go too?"

"You couldn't keep her away! Kid, you must have a wonderful gift of gab. Why, I haven't heard anything else since she came!"

Neal went over and sat down in the dark, and pretty soon he had his breath back again. It was wonderful.

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SEGER COMES

By TED GORMAN

YOUNG JOHN SEGER, small but husky Civil War vet, was hired by the Indian Bureau in the early 1870s and sent out to Darlington, Oklahoma, to practice his trade of carpenter-mason by building a schoolhouse at the newly established Cheyenne agency. The fierce and independent Cheyennes had recently been persuaded to live on an Oklahoma (as it later became) reservation and had moved south from the Arkansas River to settle along the North Canadian. (Which caused Congress speedily to revise the limits of the reservation that originally had extended only to the Cimarron, in preference to having any more trouble with the argument - loving braves.)

So-John arrived the middle of one hot afternoon at the small cluster of new buildings by a shallow bend of the North Canadian, introduced himself to the handful of fellow agency employees, and within an hour had his drawings unrolled and his tool-chest open, taking measurements preliminary to beginning work next morning. A large pile of lumber had arrived ahead of him, freighted at great trouble and expense from Wichita, 150 miles away.

No Indians were as yet encamped about the agency—but toward sundown, a dust cloud appeared on the westward plain that soon resolved itself into a large band of Cheyennes. John put his gear away and, dusting his hands, strolled over to join the other members of the agency staff, who stood squinting at the noisily approaching horde in an uneasy knot. Few of the staff had any experience whatsoever with Indians. Not knowing what to expect, but recalling all the tales of redskin savagery they'd ever heard, they were a spooky bunch. Excepting John Seger: he, as we shall see, didn't scare easily.

Shouting and jingling, on horse and afoot, the Cheyennes came swiftly on—to make camp along the river. Tepees sprang

up. The heavy squaws kindled cookfires for the evening meal and bustled about gathering firewood.

And soon those nearest the agency sighted the pile of lumber. Immediately a dozen delighted squaws descended upon and began to haul away this store of firewood so conveniently supplied.

John Seger, despite the pleas of his colleagues not to risk massacre of them all by interfering, broke away and, with flashing eyes, strode over, mounted the fast-reducing pile of lumber, and firmly ordered the redskins to stop. (His colleagues then lent support by rushing into a building and barricading the door.)

THE six-foot Cheyennes, who in most of their dealings with white men treated them, at best, with lordly tolerance, took no notice of the knob-nosed little paleface, who innocently harangued them in English. Several more squaws arrived and set to work with axes. Seger, growing red in the face, began to shout.

Finally, John sought to augment his futile vocal persuasions with action: grasping planks already in the chubby arms of the squaws, shaking his head and grimacing violently.

Soon the noise drew the interest of one of the chiefs, and he towered over to investigate. In a few moments, he got what Seger was driving at, grunted to the women to desist.

The school-builder then shook the chief's hand, and, after considerable argument and pounding on the door, managed to rejoin his still shivering associates.

Thereafter, whenever the Cheyennes had any matter to discuss with the agency, instead of going to the agent the chiefs would come to Seger and present their problems to him through their interpreter. This led to his having great influence with the Indians.

One day, after he had learned the Cheyenne language, he asked one of the chiefs why they always came to *him*. "First time we saw you," it was explained, "you talk so loud and big we know you must be a big chief from Washington."

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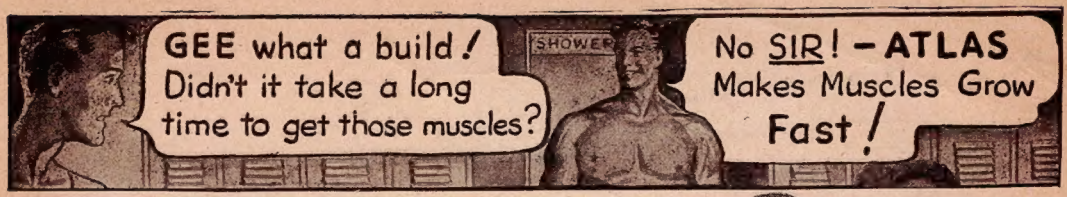

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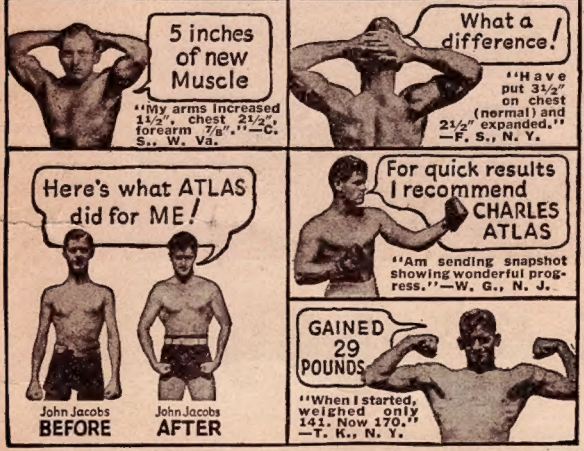
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